

ROUND DANCE

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## Introduction

My novella, *Round Dance*, engages with themes of colonialism, communal memory, and silence. The basic premise of this narrative is: Vincent, an Indigenous video game environment designer, discovers an Indigenous virtual space while developing a game and has to decide between his own personal identity as a trans man and the identity/needs of his community. As an Urban Native, he feels a psychological dislocation from his indigenous identity, which he manifests through an emotional distance from his family that stems from guilt. He reasons that this dislocation is due to his family's apprehension toward his queer identity, even though his Aunt Vera is very vocal about her support for his transition. As his work on the game progresses, he encounters sentient beings that live in the virtual indigenous space that challenge his understanding that he is the sole creator of the environment. These encounters position him as a colonizer. By designing the different elements in the game—cabins, settlements, and player characters—he is enacting and is complicit with colonial processes. Vincent's inaction is a way for me to demonstrate the paralysis that comes from acknowledging compliance with colonialism, which Vincent is implicated in through creating this game and, therefore, destroying the indigenous virtual space his mother, Gwendolyn, inhabits, along with other Native people.

This novella is a response to the difficulties I faced trying to negotiate the idea of my project and my anxiety over my positionality as a biracial, Urban Native writer working with and through Indigenous bodies, themes, and cultures that I don't feel "qualified" to appropriately engage. The anxiety of being an Urban Native, which has not been widely written about, has been debilitating and affected my writing process. By fictionalizing this process, I feel I am able to create a comfortable amount of distance between myself and this fear of being complicit in

colonialism while at the same time being able to pick apart the different, interlocking layers of my positionality.

The emphasis on place in the narrative and the communal aspect of *Newe hupia*<sup>1</sup> spilled over into the storyline and shaped Vincent's character. His attention to the details of his surroundings reflects his longing to be connected to the virtual/indigenous spaces that he is simultaneously unable and enabled to access through his work as a programmer. He engages with these specific places, Santa Cruz County and Duck Valley Reservation, by simulating and recreating his own interpretation of these geographical spaces. His drawings and coding translate the land into a memory-influenced digital space; the virtual space he creates is his understanding of his own indigeneity that is always already colonized. The communal aspect of *Newe hupia* appears in the two choruses competing for his attention. Wick, David, and the structure of the staff meetings offer a chorus of Western thoughts while Riley and Gwendolyn represent another chorus. These two groups fight for Vincent's physical and virtual space, which is an extension of Vincent's psyche. His work on the video game becomes a visual representation of his struggle with being an indigenous settler colonialist; he experiences the transgenerational trauma of colonialism, and at the same time reproduces it through his work.

For *Round Dance*, I've reframed themes of colonialism and memory within the science fiction genre that I engaged with in Professor John Rieder's course on science fiction, and employed indigenous-focused scholarship I read in Professor Candace Fujikane's cultural studies courses. *Round Dance* emerges out of my scholarship within these courses on trans-indigeneity and resurgence as transformative relationalities, that center Indigenous voices, knowledge, and

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<sup>1</sup> . . . [Newe hupia are] always sung in the context of other activities such as dancing, playing hand games (stickgame), healing ceremonies, and other rituals. . . to provide a background invoking energy and power for [these] activities. . . . The songs serve an important function by invoking *puhu* 'supernatural power' in whatever context they are being sung. . . (Crum and et al. 2)

traditions. Through a place-based lens, I wanted to examine Indigenous complicity with (settler) colonialism—to explore this through a narrative that shows how people interact with technology, negotiate gender identity, and move through virtual spaces.

The theoretical basis for this novella comes, primarily, from Grace L. Dillon's (Anishinaabe) definitions for various subgenres of indigenous science fiction, which I was introduced to in Professor Rieder's course. In the introduction to her anthology, *Walking the Clouds: Indigenous Science Fiction*, Dillon re-defines several subgenres of science fiction with indigenous knowledge at the center. The subgenres that I utilize within this piece are the contact narrative, Native apocalypse, and Native slipstream, which I've overlaid onto Chadwick Allen's (Lakota) work with the notion of trans-indigeneity and Western concepts of queerness. These different sub-genres that Dillon is re-defining are usually defined within science fiction in ways that centralize Western ideology. Dillon has moved these terms from that perspective into an indigenous focused one.

Contact narratives within science fiction usually cast Native/Indigenous people as the alien/other and pair them with themes of conquest or "discovery." The other is always seen or perceived as the enemy regardless of whether they are invading or being invaded. Dillon asserts that Indigenous science fiction writers who play with this template are able to "confront the possibility of internal colonization, a semiotic of resistance and oppression that does little to address larger historical realities that have unalterably changed Native existence" (6). By acknowledging the alien other not as an outside or separate from the self, but as a reflection of oneself, the reader is challenged "to recognize their positions with regard to the diasporic condition of contemporary Native peoples" (6).

Native apocalypse focuses on the idea of a return to balance as opposed to survival.

Western apocalypse, which is closely associated with the biblical canon, is presented as a singular traumatic event set in the future. This event, as written about in Revelations, results in an aftermath seemingly better than the time before the event. This differs from an indigenous apocalypse, which is a constant state of being that is occurring now. Dillon cites Lawrence Gross (Anishinaabe) as saying that the apocalypse is “the state of imbalance, often perpetuated by ‘terminal creeds,’ the ideologies that Gerald Vizenor (Anishinaabe) warns against in advocating survivance in the face of invisibility” (9). The act of survivance is the process of returning to balance, which reveals the “ruptures, the scars, and the trauma [of colonialism] in its effort ultimately to provide healing” for those living in this Native apocalypse (9).

Lastly, Dillon defines Native slipstream as a Native view of time as past, present, and future flowing together in one stream, “thus [replicating] nonlinear thinking about space-time” such as time travel, multiverse, or alternative realities (3). The appeal of slipstream is that it “allows authors to recover the Native space of the past, to bring it to the attention of contemporary readers, and to build better futures” by placing the reader into a world that is both familiar and estranged from their own experiences (4).

To further complicate this engagement, Professor Fujikane’s course led me to Allen’s discourse on trans-indigeneity; specifically, his analysis on the prefix “trans-,” which has a multiplicity of meanings. In the introduction to his book, *Trans-Indigenous Methodologies*, Allen grapples with the limits of the English language to fully express the fluidity between multiple indigenous communities. Allen points out that by using these types of words, one community is privileged over another:

rather than producing an enlarged view of evolving cultures or their  
(post)colonial histories, or a more precise analysis of self-representation, this form of

Indigenous-to-Indigenous comparison recenters the (uninformed) dominant settler culture and produces hierarchies of Indigenous oppression—or legitimacy or authenticity—that serves only the interests of the settler, his culture, his power, his nation-state. (xiv)

In other words, Western culture often treats distinct indigenous cultures as interchangeable and, at the same time, colonizers create hierarchies of "good" or "bad" indigenous behavior according to the demands of white supremacy.<sup>2</sup> Allen asserts that 'trans' is a more inclusive term as it holds a connotation of mutual and free mobility between spaces not limited by borders, culture, and translation.

Allen, however, doesn't fully engage the queer aspect of the prefix 'trans,' which I have intentionally placed into this narration in order to critique Western queer theory. Andrea Smith states in her article, "Queer Theory and Native Studies: The Heteronormativity of Settler Colonialism," that dominant queer theory has overwritten indigenous sexuality and gender as inherently heteronormative due to the lack of engagement between Native Studies and queer theory scholarship (41).

This lack of engagement masks indigenous queer identities as 'primitive' practices that are later claimed to further white queer identities as distinct from a Western heteronormative subjectivity. Smith, citing Povinelli's *Empire of Love*, explains that "queer politics and consciousness often rely on a primitivist notion of the indigenous as the space of free and unfettered sexuality that allows the white queer citizen to remake his or her sexuality," but once that praxis is enacted, indigenous people and their struggles are forgotten (52). This points to the

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<sup>2</sup> Allen refers to Thomas King's (Cherokee) experiences in Australia and New Zealand where settlers "casually [equated] him with Māori based on 'positive' generalizations about inherent similarities" while distancing him from Aboriginal peoples based on "negative" generalizations. Similarly, in Māori poet, Jacq Carter, monologue, "Comparatively Speaking, There Is No Struggle," the "Māori speaker is forced to respond, yet again, to the uniformed, blunt commentary of white Australians visiting Aotearoa, who find the 'Mahrees,' like King's 'Indians,' relatively 'lucky' compared with the 'Abos' back home" (xiv).

importance of Native people to queer theory and how they have been rendered invisible by it. Smith goes on to say:

At the same time, it may be the case that it is in fact a subjectless critique that disguises the fact that the queer, postcolonial, or environmentally conscious subject is simultaneously a settler subject. (52)

For Vincent, this queer subjectivity comes into direct conflict with his understanding of his indigenous identity. At the beginning of the story, Vincent attempts to establish himself as what Smith calls “the Western subject.” This subject is “universal, while the racialized subject is particular, but aspires to be universal,” which Vincent tries to accomplish through his trans aesthetic of “cis programmer realness”<sup>3</sup> that fits well within his work environment (42). I will come back to this idea later on in the “Intended Audience” section.

With these scholars’ work in mind, I’ve created a narrative that aims to place Western and indigenous technology, queerness, and science in conversation with each other. By taking these two seemingly different ways of knowing and placing them in such close proximity, one is able to see the differences, but more importantly, the overlap of these sciences when it comes to examining the natural world. For this narrative, the idea of “parallel universes” and hyperspace are not explained through theoretical physics, but Tsilhqot’in cosmology as portrayed in Helen Haig-Brown’s short film, “?E?ANX (The Cave),” of the “spirit world” that exists unseen from this plane of existence.

I hesitate to use the term “spirit world” as it doesn’t fully express the Tsilhqot’in (a First Nations tribe in the Manitoba area of Canada) understanding of this spiritual space. It might be better described by Michio Kaku’s explanation of hyperspace, or Kaluza-Klein theory. Kaku

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<sup>3</sup> Janet Mock. Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More. Atria, 2014.

explains that there is another dimension in addition to our four-dimensional (length, width, breadth, and time and space) understanding of the universe. If a fifth dimension is added to these already knowable dimensions, the equations that govern light and gravity converge and are simplified, thus creating an equation for “everything.” Light can then be understood as a vibration from the fifth dimension, a yet unknown plane of reality that, within the boundaries of a four-dimensional understanding of the universe, does not comply with established “rules.” Kaku goes on to say that in this theory:

‘matter’ can be also viewed as the vibrations that ripple through the fabric of space and time. Thus follows the fascinating possibility that everything we see around us from the trees and mountains to the stars themselves, are nothing but vibrations in hyperspace. . . . (x)

This would mean that other “matter”—trees, animals, humans—are not entirely made up of what is seen, but also what cannot be seen and only felt. To put it another way, it would be like a koi fish in a pond feeling the vibration of the rain hitting the surface of the water while it is swimming at the bottom of a pond, but not understand or seeing the rain that is beyond its plane of understanding of the water. To go back to light, humans are able to see light only in relation to the effects it has on our environment.

With this understanding of the universe, the idea of “wormholes” and Tsilhqot’in cosmology converge as real life possibilities. Under extreme circumstances—Kaku doesn’t explain what these might be—space can stretch until it rips or tears, thus creating a passage between two places, which is similar to Dillon’s definition of Native slipstream and can be seen in Helen Haig-Brown’s short film, “?E?ANX (The Cave).”

For Vincent, hyperspace, the wormhole that connects the IRL and Indigenous space, is



experience primarily within the context of the video game. He is able to see into this spiritual space via his monitor, but is unable to bodily transition into that space until the colonial artifacts of his designs are destroyed by the indigenous community within the game.

### **Aesthetics**

The aesthetic of this project is inspired by Helen Haig-Brown's short film, "‘? E?ANX (The Cave)." The film follows an unnamed cowboy hunting bears in the Tsilhqot'in territory. He tracks a bear to its cave, ties up his horse, and follows the animal into the darkness. As he crawls through the narrow opening, he sees evidence of others having come that way. He sees a light coming through an opening overhead and he climbs through the crack in the ceiling. He is outside again. While getting a drink from a river, he sees a naked woman. He recoils in embarrassment and sees other people, in traditional dress, tilling the land and fishing. They see him and respond by emitting a sound that pushes him to the ground. He scrambles back to the opening and crawls out of the cave where he finds his horse dead.

The film's aesthetic relies on atmospheric audio effects—sounds that mimic human breathing—and dreamy, visually intense cinematography. Haig-Brown packs a complex story into 12 minutes through clever editing that accelerates the passing of time and fragments the cowboy's experience. I tried to implement Haig-Brown's aesthetic in terms of auditory details. Instead of concentrating on sound, I focused on silence. Vincent's work doesn't have a backtrack except for the voice of his white protagonist. Vincent is unable to hear the voices and music that the indigenous community makes in the virtual space.

The film presents an indigenous perspective of hyperspace that places Tsilhqot'in cosmology at the center of the narrative. It doesn't explain how the unnamed cowboy is able to move into the spirit world. This liminal space between the known Western world and the

indigenous spiritual space that does not abide by conventional notions of linear time. When the cowboy returns from the indigenous spirit space, he finds that all that is left of his horse are bones.

I've taken this idea as a template for Vincent's interaction with the virtual indigenous space and his re-creation of it for the game. Like Haig-Brown's cowboy, Vincent stumbles into this virtual space, but he is conscious that it is something that he recognizes as indigenous. In a similar way, Vincent witnesses time in that virtual space as outside of what he is experiencing IRL. For example, he sees his mother not as he last saw her as an old woman, but as he remembers her from childhood.

Another text I am working from is Sherman Alexie's short story, "Distances," which imagines a world in which the historical Ghost Dance prophesied by Northern Paiute holy man Jack Wilson, known as Wovoka, comes to fruition. In this story, Alexie uses this historical event to discuss the divide between what Alexie calls "Urbans" and "Skins" within this post-Ghost Dance world. The Urbans are haunted by the Others, possibly ancestral persons from thousands of years ago that are "taller than the clouds. . . faster than memory," that sing and, sometimes kidnap the Urbans (147). The Skins and the Urbans, under the guidance of the Tribal Council, work together to burn white-men artifacts, such as radios, watches, and houses. The Skins, among themselves, discuss which people need to be burned: infected Urbans and elders that have given up.

Alexie's short story covers a large span of time in a brief narrative, like Haig-Brown's film. The narrator, a Skin, doesn't concentrate on the apocalyptic event that results in his current environment, but hurriedly recaps what has happened since. He relates sharp details about the bodies of the Others and Trembling Dancer, an Urban woman, that evoke a sense of panic.

To give a little more background on the Ghost Dance ceremony, it began in the 1890 as an intertribal spiritual practice led by Wovoka. He prophesied that if Natives gathered and performed round dances, or Ghost Dance, it would eliminate white supremacy and Natives would have their autonomy and dominion over their land restored. The dances were outlawed by the U.S. government soon after they began; however, the “Ghost Dance has become iconic of Native hope and resistance and is treated amply throughout the [Native] literature” (Dillon 143).

I took the ideas of the Ghost Dance as the trigger for a Western apocalypse and the haunting of Urbans by the Others, and employed them to show Vincent’s struggle with his complex positionality as a queer Urban. I placed the Ghost Dance into the virtual space instead of the IRL space, as the virtual space reflects Vincent’s emotional state. In the virtual space Vincent is positioned as a colonist, as he’s settling on land and removing resources from the indigenous peoples already established there. Due to his job as an environment designer, he chooses to enact colonist practices, and therefore has to confront the repercussions of his actions. This is compounded by the fact that his mother, whom I see as a stand in for Alexie’s Others, is living in the virtual space. Vincent must, literally, face his past and decide how he will reconcile with it.

In terms of the length of the project, I used Luke Sutherland’s novella, “Venus as a Boy,” as a guide for the structure. “Venus as A Boy” is broken into short chapters that are generally each a scene long and are chronologically tied together. I envisioned my novella as a series of discrete scenes all linked by other characters’ relationships to Vincent. Despite the narrative’s chronological progress, Sutherland’s novella presents a distorted impression of time, as his protagonist, Desiree, is retelling the story from memory. Readers are uncertain how old Desiree is or in what year the narrative takes place. Like Sutherland, I aimed to give memory a voice that

is both dreamy and stark.

Sherman Alexie's novel, *Indian Killer*, also shaped this project's aesthetics. Alexie's indigenous gothic novel presents a protagonist, John Smith, who is trying to come to terms with their Native identity while living in Seattle, where a series of racialized murders have occurred. John Smith's emotional turmoil is reflected in the fear and anger of the community. I borrowed this mirroring effect and produced my own version of it, as Vincent's struggles with his identity mirror his struggles with indigeneity throughout the creation of the video game. Unlike John, Vincent contends with his identity in isolation as he works on the game. He is often seen by himself coding or drawing the landscape that is his interpretation of his "indianness."

Due to these specific and dense themes I wanted to tackle, I thought the novella form was a better pick than a series of short stories or the novel form. By placing Vincent's narrative within structure, I am able to focus more on his struggle with decolonizing his view of his Indigeneity.

### **What did this project originally look like?**

The basic narrative of the first version of this project was the same: Vincent was a programmer working for a video game company who "discovered" a virtual indigenous space. The difference in that initial version was that at the beginning Vincent is dead, and has created a virus to begin the technological end of the world. A family is still contending with the apocalyptic end of the Western world, but their narrative is now focalized through a single character, Warwick, and it is not entirely clear whether or not their story is a part of a video game that Vincent was working on or if this is the resulting future created by Vincent's virus (a digital version of *Coyote and the Ghost Dance*). The narrative of the project is still presented in three storylines, but by three different narrators in different temporal spaces. Vincent's former

employees hire Isadora Friday, an ethnographer, to understand the indigenous aspects of the virtual space Vincent “discovered.”

The initial form this project took was more experimental, involving prose poetry that relied more on sound than plot points. This style was a spillover from poetry I produced in my English 625D course on creative writing pedagogy. Those pieces experimented with form and attempted to integrate an imagery-based style with science fiction content or reinterpret ideas of pedagogy. One particular piece, “3M™ (Mess Ver.),” used text from an air conditioner manual. I lifted phrases from the warning label section of the pamphlet and played with different line breaks and created new words, which were in part made with redactions from the provided text. Like many of the pieces I created during this course, this work did not have a clear narrative arc, but instead focused on imagery from science fiction, sound, and fragmentation.

This imagery-focused prose informed the aesthetics of the initial iteration of *Round Dance*, which was separated into three distinct stylistic storylines. The first version began with a prologue that was more lyrical than narrative. The following passage is the first paragraph of this section, which aesthetically sets the tone for the rest of the project.

This is the pre-apocalyptic mix; the tech TEK folktale set loose on the wet asphalt of the Mission and prowling the curving canopied back roads of Ben Lomond. The beat, cadence, and plot drive, is electric powwow slowed down to sync to the click of our hero’s heels, sensible height and soft, red leather, on wet concrete. The click-clacking of her carry-on’s wheels ticks off the last million seconds, a countdown to the reset, as our would-be savior, teal dress clinging to cold curves, scrolls the newsfeed, a drop-down menu before her eyes and rendered in laser red over the sheets of rain falling down around her.

As is evident from this excerpt, the initial version of *Round Dance* was more focused on

sound and color rather than clarity of plot. My interest in placing the story in a particular geographical space was overshadowed by the lyricism of the prose and the integration of tech jargon. The other two storylines were less lyrical, but still suffered from the same vagueness and narrative fragmentation of this first section. The other sections were focalized through specific characters, Warwick and Isadora Friday, as a means of, respectively, presenting the apocalyptic future and how it came to be.

Warwick's sections were a straightforward first person narration of how a white family was attempting to survive the end of the Western world. Warwick clashes with the local Native community that want to assimilate the family into the community and way of life. Warwick's adamant refusal to work with them was a way of examining a role reversal of power between American and indigenous ideals about family and survival.

I used Isadora Friday's portions of the narrative to explore and present indigenous scholarship within the narrative. She is the designated outsider in Vincent's indigenous space as a white woman, but still has the ethos as an indigenous studies professor to talk about indigenous knowledge with some authority and believability. Isadora's personality and the style of her sections were influenced by William Gibson's protagonist, Cayce, from his novel, *Pattern Recognition*. Isadora functioned as a stand-in for the reader, who is also being introduced to these specific indigenous knowledges, such as the Ghost Dance.

Beyond Isadora's character, Gibson's influence can be seen in how I discussed technology. Gibson focuses on the marketability of knowing and how technology influences the speed and means by which it is presented to the public. Cayce's way of seeing the world, at times, celebrates that marketability and, at other times, positions it as a creepy, infiltrating apparatus that has no loyalty to land, nation, or person.

### **Procedure:**

This structure, however, was not working well for what I wanted the narration to address, namely the different layers of trans-ness in Vincent's identity. He was pushed to the background and the past by the three storylines. His voice was limited to memory, His queer identity was not fully explored and his death at the very beginning played into the prevalent narratives about dead, gender non-conforming people as being disposable. In retrospect, I think that I pushed this aspect of Vincent's identity to the background because of my apprehension of speaking about trans issues. I wasn't ready to explore that part of his character.

With this newer version of *Round Dance*, I addressed this issue by placing Vincent and his struggles as the focus and driving force behind the plot. The reader experiences the virtual and the IRL space through his perspective. His queer identity is presented as a part of his everyday life and not as a plot point as it was in the first version. His experiences as a transitioning male are not hidden from the reader or highlighted as alien experiences. His bedtime routine of taking off his binder and his aunt's worry about his hormone induced acne are normalized through the casual tone of their conversation.

By presenting Vincent as the focal point of the narrative, I was able to move away from the prose poetry style to a prose style to create a narration with clear plot points. This better fit Vincent's personality as someone who is dedicated to the accuracy of translation of his visual text as an environment designer. Throughout the novella, Vincent is researching, editing, and painstakingly translating the IRL space into the virtual space of the game.

Vincent's process of interpreting his world spilled over into my own process. As I've already said, much of my work up until this point was experimental and fragmented. For this piece I had to focus more on the narrative arc and what it meant to Vincent's progress as a

character. I started using outlines, reading and conducting interviews with digital environment designers, and searching for actual pictures of Santa Cruz county to help me write about his process. The outlines were most helpful as they helped map out both his internal and external spaces; the interview with the designers gave me insight into what kind of issues he'd face as an artist for a small gaming company; and the pictures grounded the piece in a specific, real life geographical space.

By grounding the narration in a particular area, I was able to work more freely with time and memory. I slimmed down to a single close third narration that is focalized through Vincent, but the narration is by no means linear. Vincent's focus is constantly moving from the present to memories of his early childhood with his mother to the virtual space, which doesn't have a designated timestamp. This movement between time was easier for me to handle than the three distinct storylines in the previous version.

**Intended audience:**

The intended audience for this new project is far broader than that of my initial idea. *Round Dance* is intended for casual science fiction readers. It takes most of its aesthetics from Grace Dillon's definition of the apocalyptic "as the state of being *aakozi*, Anishinaabemowin for . . . 'out of balance,'" and Helen Haig-Brown's short film, "The Cave" (Dillon 9). By using these two texts as a foundation I wanted to re-orient the ideas of the apocalypse into an indigenous framework. And to get to the point that, for Native people, the apocalypse is not a single event that has been survived, but a constant state of being that is currently being experienced. And for Vincent, as well as myself, the apocalyptic event in both external and internal. The breaking down of the game, the Native virus that eats away at Vincent's settlements, is a form of him decolonizing his own mind.



I envision that this would appeal to those who appreciate reading Octavia Butler's work and similar science fiction: work that Dillon calls "speculative science fiction," that doesn't rely on hard science to explain the estrangement within the text.

I also had queer audiences in mind as I was writing this, but I didn't want to write a coming out story or about a family coming to terms with a relative's queerness. The former has been exhausted and is of little interest to me as someone who came out as a teenager. The family focused narrative bothered me for a similar reason. Many queer narratives have been usurped by hetero or perceived heteronormative ideas about family relationships. They often focus on the family member and not the queer person, such as in *The Danish Girl* or Lifetime's made for TV movie *Something About Jane*. The heterosexual character's struggle and personal growth while dealing with the queer person's identity becomes central to the plot.

The type of queer narrative I wanted to create was one that focused solely on the queer person and how they dealt with the intertextuality of their identity as it comes up against other non-heteronormative spaces. Vincent is not struggling with coming out and his family is, for the most part, very supportive of his transition. His struggle is with how he sees his indigenous identity within the context of a primarily Western environment that has affected his relationship with his family and his indigenous culture.

To re-orient this into a queer perspective, Vincent worries about "passing" for an indigenous person. In terms of gender, it is assumed by way of omission, that Vincent is perceived as "passing" as male. His co-workers and family don't make any comment on his gender presentation. He is not embarrassed by the current iteration of his body, but is hopeful for what it will look like in the future. When he speaks to his aunt about the possibility of getting top surgery, he is almost giddy over the thought.

What does come into question almost constantly is his “indigeneity” and his presentation of that identity as it is judged by others. His cousin, Riley, consistently tells him he’s a “bad Indian” because of the way he talks and how he treated Gwendolyn. Wick expects Vincent to perform an indigenous identity as he pressures Vincent to put more “Indian stuff” into the video game. Vincent is hesitant and anxious about Wick’s request—he doesn’t want to add indigenous decoration to the game, and he feels unqualified to do so. His identity as an Indigenous man is being policed by both his Western and Indigenous communities, and the ambiguity of the novella’s ending reflects the complexity of Vincent’s struggle.

**Questions: What are you looking to further? What will you do with this project?**

In terms of global revisions, I would ideally like to re-work this novella into novel form, as that would allow an even deeper exploration of Vincent’s indigenous identity. I also want to explore more of the connection between Vincent and Riley. As I’ve written them, they offer two different representations of “Indianness” within a contemporary American society. Vincent is an “Urban Indian” while Riley is coded as a “rez Native.” Their different perspectives on their shared culture and history create moments of tense silence that manifest as banter. They speak a lot to each other, but they don’t really say anything to each other. What I want to explore more is how this silence relates to their ideas of their physical bodies within a contemporary American society, which has an established idea of “Indianness” that neither of them fit into.

The general view, as it is represented within media, of American Indian bodies is that of hyper-spirituality or sexuality and exoticism. These notions manifest differently for perceived male and female bodies.<sup>4</sup> Male bodies are seen as sexless warriors or spiritual leaders, such

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<sup>4</sup> “The apocalypse in this case has split sexuality in two. The first part entails an almost complete repression, and end of sex and, by extension, of all duality. The second lives as continual transgression, a polymorphous release of sexual and violent energies onto diverse forbidden objects—objects that are in fact religiously forbidden, taboo,

Tonto in *The Lone Ranger*, or hyper-sexualized, but stoic like Jacob in *Twilight*. For female bodies, Pocahontas or Tiger Lily, they are always hypersexualized. In both cases, they are always heterosexual.

Obviously for Vincent, I have labeled him as queer, but have not touched on his sexual orientation. While writing this piece it didn't seem important to explore that aspect of his identity at length. Pre-transition, he mentions having a girlfriend who "gifted him his bed," but that is the full extent to which his sexual orientation is talked about. If I was to go back and work on this project, I would explore the possibility of Vincent being asexual, or ace. Asexuality is not often talked about or really understood by many people, and I think this would be an interesting way of addressing dominant perspectives on Native male sexuality.

Riley's sexual orientation is established, peripherally, as heterosexual. She and Vincent reminisce about her ex-boyfriend, "Neck Tattoo," but it is used more as a means of distracting them from having to talk seriously about their issues with each other. I originally wanted Riley to come out to Vincent as bisexual or gay, but it didn't fit into the narrative. I think having her identify as bisexual or gay would do several things: create representation of queer indigenous females, add another layer to the conflict between her and Vincent over his transition, and give another reason why she has been distant from her own mother. This last point I find most interesting as it parallels Vincent's relationship with Gwendolyn. I would like to see how these two characters would navigate these parallel narratives together or apart.

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sacred: human life, which must not be taken, and the male anus, which must not be penetrated." James Berger. After the End: Representation of Post-apocalypse. University of Minnesota, 1999.

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## **Round Dance**

Vincent hurried his pace; he had approximately 200 quick-trotting steps—135 if he took long strides—to the front office of Big Man Games, brainchild of Warwick Jones and the “financial sinkhole” swallowing the Jones family name.

He was late, again, but he was crucial to the company’s current project. He was their environment design artist. His work was in Cupertino, an hour bus ride inland from Santa Cruz toward San Jose, where, in theory, he built entire worlds from his very detailed memories. In actual practice, he drew trees. They were very realistic looking trees, practically indecipherable from the real thing besides the fact that they were made of data and not chains of protein, but trees nonetheless. He’d often hole up in the downtown library in search of particular flora: arrowweed, red dogwood, or pond cypress. It was tedious work, but Vincent liked to be accurate. For this project he took hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures of the Pogonip trails and the winding 28-mile stretch of the 17 freeway. In most things, Vincent preferred accuracy to artistic flourishes. His designs reflected that. BMG, and Wick in particular, liked that about him.

What they didn’t like was when he was tardy. Rounding the corner, Vincent saw the front door just ahead and the elevator just beyond that. Vincent slowed his pace, readjusting the strap of the bag on his shoulder. This was the third time he’d been in danger of being late.

In his defense, he’d been working late into the night, having to catch the midnight bus back into town. He missed his alarm because of the overtime, his body needing the sleep more than the money. Sometimes his work required, which is to say Wick required, him to stay overnight, leaving him to sleep at the office under his desk. The elevator doors slid open and he stepped in. Sleep is an inconvenience, he thought as he mashed the button for the seventh floor, and a luxury.

BMG's current project, an MMORPG set in apocalyptic northern California, was closing in on its "preliminary final stages." It was a much larger project than the small company was used to. They were known for side-scrollers and text-based PRGs, but Wick, the "visionary" owner and writer, wanted to branch out into something a little more unknown.

"We're going to change the game entirely," Wick had announced at the quarterly meeting. David had scoffed because, "You can't change the game with something that's been there since the beginning." Vincent saw the logic in that. They weren't doing anything extraordinary. They were employing a new graphics system, sure, but at its most basic, the project was a *Second Life* rip-off. "Maybe," Wick had conceded, "but we're going to do it better. It's going to look better, the NPC are going to be more realistic, the interactions authentic. It will be a whole new world." In response, David began singing the opening bars to the 1992 classic Disney theme.

That was almost a year and a half ago. So far they were nowhere near close to hitting their milestone targets. David easily built a small 10-tower test network in one of the back rooms and the basic mechanics were mostly copy-and-pasted from other failed MMORPGs. Wick personally hated David's choice in templates. "We should be learning from better systems," he argued, but David had shrugged it off as wanting to learn from mistakes first. Vincent, at the time, didn't care because he was getting paid and getting sleep, but now it seemed like he might not be getting either pretty soon.

Still, Vincent didn't like to think too much about the mechanics of the project because that wasn't his job. That was David's department. Vincent's job was to make it all look pretty and run as smoothly as possible once it launched. The latter was easy with the new hardware that was now available. The amount of detail he could pack into one square foot of space was mind-boggling; this must be how God felt.

Even his skills as a designer would not make up for his perpetual tardiness. As much as Wick liked his work, Vincent knew he couldn't get away with this forever.

He dashed from the elevator as soon as the doors opened and sprinted to the meeting room at the end of the hallway. As he entered, he could hear that Wick was in the middle of the customary morning pep talk to the team. "You're brilliant. You wouldn't still be here if you weren't."

Vincent quickly stepped behind Wick and grabbed himself a cup of coffee from the table near the door before sliding down behind the long line of people seated at the table.

Taking a quick glance around he saw that the room was already full; most of the team had slept over with the hopes of catching up on work. By the look on some of their faces, Vincent was sure they hadn't had much luck. David's team, a group of four, looked the worst. The bags under their eyes were black as if they'd each gotten two punches to the face for breakfast. Their clothes and hair were in disarray. Each shakily gripped a mug of coffee. David, leaning back in his chair at the other end of the table and tapping lazily at his phone, looked, comparatively, to be in much better shape.

Vincent avoided eye contact with Wick as he slipped into his seat next to David at the head of the table.

"Hey man, did you get my email last night?" David leaned toward him, his phone cradled in the palm of his hand. He was playing Candy Crush.

"No, I crashed as soon as I got home. Why, what's up?" Vincent attempted to balance his coffee on his knee as he reached into his bag to pull out his sketchpad. The cup teetered, but did not spill.

"Nothing, just wanted to remind you to not be late," David shrugged. "Would hate for

you to miss out on this *wonderful* presentation Wick put together.”

“Didn’t we have one last week?”

“You know Wick, can’t pass up a good slideshow.”

“What’s this one on?”

“Table reading for the cathartic moment,” David replied, tapping at his phone screen a few time before it froze, announcing he’d made it to the next level. As Wick finished his motivational speech, David gave his full attention to his game. Vincent readjusted his sketchpad so that it sat propped in his lap, hiding his work from view.

“—with that being said, let’s get started,” Wick announced, gesturing to his right. “Robby. James. Veronica.” The interns, all college-aged and looking uncomfortable with the tired and bloodshot eyes staring back at them, stood up as the lights dimmed and the projector whirled to life.

On the far wall the landscape he’d drawn slowly faded into focus: a snow covered valley, surrounded by white-capped mountains and covered in redwoods and cedar, dipped low to meet the edge of a wide lake. On the far side, smoke billowed from a small, enclosed encampment. Wick had named it Nuktuk as a horrendous placeholder. This winter, the season Vincent made, was harsh and ravenous as it swallowed all the color from the land.

“They came in early winter in a sunny Datsun pickup,” one of the interns—Robby? —began. He, like the other male intern, was tall and pale from too many hours in the testing room. “Samson, their movie star handsome spokesman, rode in the back holding onto the buck’s antlers, singing.”

The landscape dissolved and another appeared. A yellow pickup filled with dark, long haired men. Vincent had drawn this one as well. He modeled the car off of his Aunt Vera’s



pickup. The doors were tinged with splotches of red rust from where the paint had peeled away from years of Vera's reckless driving. A spider web crack overtook the passenger side of the windshield and the driver looked a little like Buffy Saint-Marie. Or his mother.

"His voice, a high pitched quiver and crescendo, carried over the sad tut-tut of the truck's engine," the intern continued. From the side, Vincent could see Wick mouthing the words with Robby, who for all his efforts delivered the lines with wooden enthusiasm. "The truck skidded to a stop, wheels slipping on the slush and mud, as the song ended with a booming—"

"Amen," James said in little more than a whisper. Wick cleared his throat and James tried again with a little more energy. Wick gave him a slight nod to continue. "Heya, Custer," he yelled, which set Vincent's teeth on edge.

"Samson pointed over his shoulder," Robby intoned as James performed the half-hearted gesture, "while the other men dragged the large buck carcass off the back bed."

"What do you think?" A character sheet of Samson dissolved onto the screen. Vincent had drawn him with a tortilla chip body type, broad on top and a tapered waist, that gave the model a metahuman look; Samson, like his namesake, was a "superman."

James tripped over his next lines and that's when Vincent turned off his brain and let his eyes drift to the large window overlooking the surrounding neighborhood. He watched the early morning fog recede from between the surrounding office buildings, glass fingers raking through long, graying hair of cumulus, and move through the tangle of streets below. Despite, and possibly in spite of, the cold winter, the rain had not come. It was too cold to rain.

"Doesn't that mean vagina?" Vincent woke up and looked at Veronica, her small face scrunched with something like disgust. The rest of the team snickered, hiding their tired faces in their hands. "Squaw. It means 'vagina,' right?" She directed that last comment to Vincent, who

for his part, looked around the table in a plea for help. There was none. The rest of the team looked at him expectantly—except for David who was now on level 25—for confirmation that, yes, ‘squaw’ was ‘vagina’ in ‘Native American.’

“That’s the point,” Wick interjected forcefully. The room immediately fell silent. “Can we move on, please?” The interns continued and the rest of the team refocused on the slides on the screen. “Skip to the opening scene. Page 22.”

“Why isn’t the opening scene on the first page?” David whispered to no one at all as he swiped his finger across his screen.

“Helicopters,” James began, “—framed in the windshield of Frank’s Range Rover—flew as low as they dared above the packed the 17 freeway.” The screen transitioned through several landscapes, season, and characters until it settled on an actual photograph of a section of the freeway in questions; Vincent recognized it as the short stretch near Old Santa Cruz Road. “The dark forest of pines along the sloping mountainside—”

Vincent let his gaze and attention drop to the notebook in his lap. He turned the page over to the final sketch: the koi pond off of the Spring Box Trail. Two redwoods, sentinels of bark and branches, sat at the edge of the water, their roots peeking over the edge of a squared-off space. Birdsfoot fern and redwood ivy crowded along the stone edgeways, slick with unusual autumn rain. The pond itself was marked with dashes of golden orange; the koi fiery commas and semicolons punctuating the blank space of the page.

He’d have to work on this section of land later. A checkpoint—a lookout tower, a trading post, and a ‘fast travel’ point—needed to be permanently planted nearby. Vincent figured that the pond could serve as a marker for PCs to follow to and from checkpoints. He’d have to carve out a path, wide enough for a hiker or someone on horseback, but not enough for a car. Vincent

reasoned that by compressing the pathways, he'd lessen traffic and, therefore, lag in the area. Or what he really should do was not have a trail at all; have it be washed away with the rest of the world.

He flipped back through, looking for his notes, but stilled his fingers at the sight of one of the entries, a portrait of his younger cousin Riley. The sketch was lifted from a moment he carefully kept preserved in the clean, clear boxes of his memory. In the sketch, her long hair was pulled back from her face into a tight ponytail. Her lips were thin and wrinkled into a small, barely-there smile. Her eyes were turned away, looking off to the side as if someone had called her name.

Vincent remembered the full scene he lifted that image from. Gwendolyn Manning, Vincent's mother, did not like the idea of being buried. She objected to being stuck in the confines of a satin-lined box and forgotten. "Set me on fire," she'd said, "I want to go like I came!" Nurses had flooded her hospital room, sedating Gwendolyn—all billowing white hair and senile indignation—as she began another round of screams. Riley had stood by him. She even allowed him to hold onto her wrist as the sedatives took hold of his mother. He watched Gwendolyn's eyes bulge, then flutter closed in such a dramatic fashion that Riley scoffed. "Melodramatic to the last drop." Vincent nodded and clutched her wrist tighter.

When his mother passed, Riley had accompanied him to get her body cremated in California and they'd flown Gwendolyn's ashes to Boise. From there, he drove the rental car the three hours to the Duck Valley Reservation, where they would scatter the remaining pieces of Gwendolyn Manning on the burial plots of her mother, father, and four brothers as per his Aunt Vera's request. "If she's not going to let us stick her in the ground with the rest of us, we can at least put her where we want her until the wind takes her again."

Riley had held his mother's ashes in her lap, cradling them against her stomach. The light from the radio had given her face an ethereal glow that made her look much younger than her twenty-four years. She looked like a child too stubborn to cry, which might have been better than him not feeling anything at all. At least Riley knew she could feel something even if she refused to feel it. And she did refuse. She had decided to drain her features of emotion, her face seemingly frozen by Gwendolyn's death. An hour into the drive, Vincent had given up on trying to make conversation with her. He might as well be talking to his mother's ashes.

Instead he relied on the radio for companionship. Within the city limits, he switched between NPR and classic rock. As they made their way through the mountains, racing toward the valley, the soothing voice of Melissa Block cracked with static. The other station played in and out from beneath the white noise that played over the sound of the wind moving outside the car.

In Riddle, a small ranch town twenty minutes outside of Duck Valley, the station caught, what Vincent knew was, an unprecedentedly clear signal. The final refrain from *Baba O'Riley* played: "Teenage wasteland, teenage wasteland. We are wasted."

Vincent chanced a look in Riley's direction and that small imperceptible smile was there. It softened her grief-stiffened features.

"Vince, are you with us?"

Vincent slammed the sketchpad closed. The room was empty except for them so he was momentarily confused as to who 'we' Wick was referring to. "Yes, I'm here."

"You blanked out at the end there." Wick looked down on him, his thick-rimmed glasses concealing most of his face. Vincent responded with a nod. "I'm trusting you here, Vince. This project could change everything." He nodded again. "Don't let me down." Wick's voice was almost paternal, but in a way that made Vincent feel shaky and clutch at his own wrists.

The low hum of the computer fans stirred the silence in the office. Most of the team had already gone home. The programmers, as usual, stayed behind to work their way through the growing list of glitches. They'd decided to take a break and gone out for a food run, David leading the rally to In N' Out. They'd taken Robby, or James, to wait in line for them while they chain-smoked in the parking lot.

So for now, the office was empty and Vincent was completely alone. He heard the air moving through the vents and the groaning of the metal gibs about the windows as the temperature dropped. He felt that chill, too, moving along the space between his collar and the band of his headphones draped around his neck. For once it didn't feel like an invasion or an attack against his body, but like fingers combing through the fine hairs at his neck.

He jotted down another note in his sketchpad.

The opening cutscenes were in the final stages, which meant Vincent had to interrogate every single detail. The segment was long and complicated and the notes from the last meeting were only somewhat helpful. Still, Vincent had worked out most of the major glitches—inadequate articulation of limbs, disappearing floors, and a character's general disregard for basic physics—that had littered the initial presentation.

He pulled his headphones over his ears and started the video again.

The boy's mother—Wick hadn't decided on names yet—fussed with him in the doorway of the cabin. Vincent noted the narrowness and how it awkwardly framed their bodies.

She tightened the red scarf about his neck, affectionately patting the knot resting on his chest before moving to brush snowflakes from his shoulder. Her hands, slim and shaking, lingered there. She cried, a stream of tears spilling from her eyes, as her mouth moved in sync

with the muffled words of the voice actress. Vincent thought that the sound on her voice could be turned down. Her dialogue still came in a little too clear.

Their faces were framed in a tight close-up that focused on the parallel lines of the eyes, noses, and mouths. Her expression was worried, the skin between her eyes creasing and her eyes looked glassy from tears. The boy's dull green eyes widened. His cheeks changed to an appropriate hue of pink to relay a sense of shock or embarrassment.

The camera pulled wide to show the entire porch. This time their bodies fit perfectly within the interior frame of the doorway as the boy guided her into a one-armed hug. His other hand held tight to the leather strap of the rifle at his side. The long barrel rubbed against his bony thigh as he maneuvered her head to rest comfortably in the crook of his neck.

Her hair, sandy blonde like his, clung to his lips as they moved, articulating words Wick had not yet written. Vincent imagined what a mother might say in such a moment: "be good," "be brave," "come home safe," "don't go." There were so many heart-felt sentiments to choose from, but in the end Wick would have to decide.

The camera panned upward, turning skyward. Clouds lingered in uniform gray above the summit of the mountain just beyond the valley. The texture was distributed at random to give a sense of naturalness that Vincent would have to adjust with the changing of the season; he had the exact HEX color codes for any given forecast. It wasn't necessary, but it was useful. The snow, a mixture of FAFafa and F1F1F1, had whited out an already bleak landscape. The woman clung, almost digging her nails into the young man's side.

From left to right, the camera panned across the front porch, the woodpile noticeably shorter than it had been at the beginning of the cutscene, and settled on the man standing a few feet away from the cabin. The camera orbited around him, its view settling behind his left

shoulder. Vincent had initially modeled him on Wick as a joke between him and David. Wick quickly adopted the character as their leading man, liking his style. “Silicon Valley hipster with an R.E.I. gift card,” was how David described their initial design attempts. Vincent agreed that the digital-Wick—or, as they’d decided on, D.W.—looked a little too clean-cut for the environment. They made him taller, broadened his chest, gave him a permanent five o’clock shadow, and renamed him Frank. His clothes reflected the progression in the game; his pants became muddy and the cuffs of his pants were coated in snow.

“We should be going.” The man’s voice came out too clear over the speakers, making it sound like he was talking directly into Vincent’s ear. Over the man’s shoulder, Vincent saw the boy stiffly pull away from his mother and walk in Frank’s direction. The older man’s head turned to watch as the boy kept walking to the edge of the clearing.

The boy stopped, his stance relaxing as he looked out into the gray before him. Vincent paused the playback, evaluating the boy’s silhouette against the backdrop’s monochrome scenery. His waist was noticeably slimmer than at the beginning of the game. Even under the large jacket Vincent had dressed him in, his jeans seemed almost empty, hanging off him too loosely. There wasn’t much meat left on him. Vincent jotted down a few more notes then pressed play.

The sound of snow crunching underfoot played cleanly as the camera panned left, following Frank’s gaze. The woman, now framed in a close-up, looked up into the camera—angled as an over the shoulder shot that captured Frank’s profile. Her expression was earnest and looked sterner with the deep lines about her eyes and lips. Vincent paused the video again and flipped through his notebook, looking for the woman’s character design pages. Vincent had given her a few all to herself: portraits, action shots, costume designs, and age progression. Finding her timeline page, he held it up to his screen and compared the faces. In her back story,

she was a smoker, but through development they'd dropped that and forgotten to get rid of wrinkles around her mouth and eyes. He hit play again.

"Don't let him get away from you," she said. The voice actress still had that chain-smoker rasp that they would have to get rid of. He watched as the woman tugged hard at Frank's collar, pulling him down to meet her eyes. His movements were jerky, his jacket not fully rendering in time with his body. "Don't let him get away." Frank pulled away from her and the video faded to black.

Vincent hunched over his notes, quickly sketching a few details he couldn't transform into words, as the video repeated. Digital snow fell in tight clustering swirls, the wind howling and shaking the screen. The frame panned, zooming into the settlement below. The storm swelled, the wind whistling as Frank's voiceover began. "The riots began where they always do: Compton, L.A., and Baltimore. Compton was a surprise. It had gotten nice over the years, then fell back into old habits."

Vincent scowled at the dialogue. Wick and David had written this part after binge-watching coverage of the election and the *Walking Dead*. David's willingness to even participate in the writing sessions was a surprise, since the graphic designer hated the long conversations about character motivation. After a particularly long argument over an action sequence he'd yelled, "I just want to blow shit up!" David had voiced early on that he only wanted to write code and test the game, but as the deadline for the game's release drew nearer and their lack of progress threatened his job security he invested a little more of his time.

David's interest waned as the notes from the last few meetings buried him in work. The game, as it was, was self-contained within a small network of PCs housed in a tiny, windowless room at the back of the office. Vincent was certain that it had been a supply closet at some point.



That was also where David spent half of his time. He ran through lines of code with his team, which consisted of the four programmers and the three interns he bullied into helping with the project. David thought they were useless, but kept them on anyway because, as he put it, “Free labor is free labor.” There were issues with the NCPs in particular settlements so their assistance was valuable.

He traded the writing meetings for an extra few hours of code writing or a nap on the smoking bench out back behind the building, which left Vincent alone with Wick. Without David’s naturally antagonistic presence, Wick was free to do as he pleased, which left Vincent scribbling down notes like “kinesthetic drive” and “ethical dispensation”—notes that in the end never made it into the actual story, but seemed to make Wick feel better about the slow progress the team was making. Vincent knew he had good intentions, but the dialogue was so tone deaf.

Vincent looked up at the screen. The images they’d created—a montage of four second clips—played in tandem with the droning voiceover. “To no one’s surprise, the first attack was on Wall Street.” A sea of people, their faces covered by masks or bandanas, surrounded the Wall Street Bull. Stock audio of a roaring crowd was laid over the clip for added effect, but the quality was poor from a bad transfer of data. It was a silly mistake that, he assumed, one of the interns had made. Their bodies moved like waves, pushing against the bronze statue, its face tinged a fiery orange from the streetlight and road flares. “The economy had been tanking for decades, but it was just crumbling like sugar in the rain.” The sea of bodies continued to move, pushing harder against the sculpture until it fell onto its side. “People were losing their jobs, their homes, their sanity.” The animal’s severe gaze turned fearful under the dimming red light. “On the way up to the cabin, we heard on the radio about them marching on Wall Street.”

Vincent wrote down a few more notes in his sketchbook. The voice actor punched some

of the words too hard. The sibilant audio sizzle made his ears itch. They would have to go back and fix the sound. This would be the third time. Although, in his opinion, they should just find a new cast. The actors they had were just the ones who'd responded to the Craigslist ad and were willing to work without pay.

This left them with some mediocre talent that was only improved by whatever tricks David and he could manage with auto-tune. Still, they had to use the interns for the minor NPC voices, which were only marginally better. The three undergraduates were good at sounding afraid—their voices holding the type of trepidation that an apocalyptic world required. Interning for David seemed to help with that.

“The last broadcast was from Congress; they'd captured the C-Span feed to make their final announcement.” Vincent looked up again as this clip played. This one he hadn't made. This was stock footage of the Congress Chambers, which was touched up by one of the interns. Vincent hadn't liked the idea of using someone else's work to supplement his own, but Wick had insisted that it would give a layer of texture. David saw it as a way of saving time. Vincent just saw it as tacky and inconsistent.

The modified clip began to play. The double doors to the Chambers flung open as a mass of screaming bodies burst through the doorway. The style was vastly different from the rest of the cutscene. It was cell-shaded, giving the mob and their movements an animation sort of look; it gave the violence a whimsical aesthetic that minimized the possibility of getting an M-rating.

The mob moved like a series of waves, a blur of black flooding the aisles and sweeping up the leather-backed chairs. They threw them down into the Well of the House, while dousing the furniture in gasoline. “Militants, would-be revolutionaries, burned it to the ground.”

From the entrance of the Well, the pile of chairs was perfectly placed at the center against

the Reporter of Debate's desks and spilled over onto the Record Clerk's table. The angle gave a clear view of the Speaker's chair, where a woman was standing in the shadows. This Vincent hadn't noticed on the first play through. Even with the low lighting, he saw that she was dressed like the others, but her face was not concealed by a mask or cloth. Her hair was left loose and hung low around her waist.

The mob's singular voice grew with intensity as the woman moved forward. Vincent's breath caught in his throat as she came into view. It wasn't possible, but the woman looked like Riley. Their dark hair and faces were identical. The scowl the woman had on her face was a look he had seen on his cousin's face many times before. The digital figure stepped up onto the table with one fist in the air, signaling the faceless throng to cry out to her, and a red road flare in the other. The woman cried out, "We will no longer stand for this fuckery!" She sounded like Riley, he thought as he panicked over the reality of the idea. He leaned in closer to the screen. The camera pulled in tight around her face and hastily tilted into a Dutch angle as if the camera had physically been tossed onto its side.

She tossed the flare on the pile of chairs, which quickly went up in flames. The fire consumed the screen. "We left before the real riots came." Frank's voiceover played, the audio stretched as the video froze then disappeared. A moment later, the screen turned blue. A stop error.

Vincent sat back in his chair, the light from the monitor illuminating his face. His eyes followed the fast succession of numbers as they popped up on the screen, but didn't really follow their meaning. He just let it go on until the system prompted him to restart.

Vincent decided to take the day off early; the image of Riley standing in the defiant red glow was still fresh in his mind. He tried to focus on his work foresting an entire sector of the northern region of the map, but the work was too mindless. He could have done it in his sleep and he would still see Riley standing on the floor of Congress and setting it ablaze.

He tried to actively listening to Wick and David's endless console debate. David believed in the virility of early 80's hardware, Atari and NES, 8-bits of pure entertainment without the unnecessary noise and bulk of Microsoft's work. Vincent, from his desk, could see David beginning this discourse: the veins in his neck beginning to pop and a pink glow rising from beneath his collar. Wick leaned back against David's desk, a straight shot from Vincent's, gripping the edge for dear life.

Vincent quickly gave up as soon as Wick began talking. The man's voice was calm, but angry excitement was still evident in his posture, his fingers still holding firm to the edge of the desk. Vincent slipped his laptop back into its bag as Wick settled into his aggressive counter, his hand flipping to emphasis each point. David took a step back. He crossed his hairy arms as if to physically hold his irritation inside his chest. It didn't work, as he then flung them out and up at one of Wick's particularly obnoxious opinions.

Vincent didn't bother trying to really sneak out; Wick had already settled into his stride, ticking off every single virtue that Bill Gates possessed. The phrase, "He donates **CHICKENS** to Africa!" rattled the glass walls of Wick's office, making Vincent hesitate a moment before continuing with his exit.

The café on First was dimly lit and gave off all the appropriate speakeasy vibes. Lilting jazz, Billie Holiday's "Bless the Child," played on the upright on the small stage pushed up against the bare brown brick of the far wall. On nights when there was a need, the stage housed a

five-piece band.

Now, the stage was dim. The pianist, hunched with his shoulders tucked to his ears, sat in the dark working through a repertoire of jazz standards. The bartender, a young woman wearing a sleeveless shirt that showed off her Japanese inspired tattoos, would periodically walk to the stage to refill the drink atop the piano. She'd retreat to the bar where she'd resume writing, in colorful chalk, the specialty drinks along the painted black wall above the shelves of liquor bottles.

From the mezzanine, Vincent watched her careful lettering and the sweeping motions of her arms as she drew out a series of smooth lines that made up the border. He watched as chalk dust, a multicolored cloud against the blackboard, twisted in the current of cool, dry air coming from the vents above. He imagined a dry summer heat, kicked up by balding tires, turning over that plume of fine grain color. The smell of hay and livestock filled his lungs.

Three summers after they scattered his mother's ashes, Riley crashed Vera's yellow truck. She'd been visiting home out in Duck Valley. She'd call him weekly complaining about the conditions. "I forgot how big the mosquitoes were. Got me right through my jeans." She'd taken a few of the other cousins out to Chinaman's Hat, the lookout at the back of the valley before Bull Creek, and took a turn too fast. The truck flipped onto the driver's side, pinning her behind the wheel. The medics had to cut her out of her seat then flew her out to nearest hospital with an ICU, which was in Boise. She was in a coma for the last two weeks of her summer vacation.

The truck had been pushed to the side of the dirt road to make room for the ambulance. It was completely wrecked. The driver's side door was cut in half and all the windows were in pieces on the floorboard of the cabin. The dreamcatcher Gwendolyn made survived somehow.

Vincent hadn't heard about it until weeks later—the electricity had gone out again in the Valley and Vera had been too worried to phone—when Riley had called him from her hospital bed. “I’m not dead,” was all she said. Vincent had to call back three times, once because the receptionist patched him to the wrong R. Smith and the second because she’d hung up on him again, before she’d explained the whole story. “I wasn’t drinking,” she’d insisted, “What kind of modern Native would I be if I was drunk driving? A dead one, cuz. Roadkill.” Vincent heard Vera gasp of horror over the phone, but he took this in stride. Riley had always been like that; she appreciated darker humor.

Although Vera had maintained that something was off about her. “Her eyes seem a little clearer, like a lake in winter. She’s seen something.”

His Ada Rick, the self-appointed medicine man, agreed, feeling certain she’d passed through to the other side. “The border between here and there is thin, nephew,” he told him, Vincent hearing the old man scratch at the stubble on his chin. “The ancestors are as much here with us as we are there with them.” Vincent thought of Schrodinger’s cat and quantum entanglement: existence predicated by not existing. “She’s just feeling the repercussions of that meeting. You know, like jetlag. She’ll be fine.”

From what Vera had told him a few nights before she was not fine. More than a year later and her eyes still had that glassiness that changed her dark brown eyes to an almost honey color. Something had shocked the color out of her irises.

Now, in the café he felt a pang of guilt run through him that replaced his worry. He had seen her; he was sure almost to the point of admitting it to himself. He pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed Riley’s number. It rang a few times then went to voicemail. He tried FaceTime. He smoothed down his hair and brushed it a few different ways before pushing it back away

from his eyes.

“Your hair’s fine. Stop fussing.” Riley’s voice came over the speaker quiet, but clear. The video playback started a second later. He saw the clutter of her desk, where she had propped up the phone, and the tousled sheets on her bed. Her room was sparsely decorated. He saw a flash of her move across the screen, her bare stomach and the waistband of her jeans.

“Do you really think so,” he said, trying to sound casual. “I was going to get it cut.”

“You should grow it out,” she said off screen. He watched as a seemingly full backpack was tossed onto the bed. “Long, luxurious Native locks would kill in Silicon.”

“I’m not a fan of the man-bun.” He fingered the lip of his coffee cup, now only acknowledged as an outlet for his nervous energy. “I like my *Windtalker* short cut.” She didn’t respond and he took a sip of coffee, now cold.

She came into view, now fully clothed. She wore a Kerry green and gray Portland State t-shirt. Printed across her chest was the school’s emblem; the letters P, S, and U overlaid each other to resemble a Gaelic knot. She squatted in front of the screen, which was only wide enough to show the top part of her face: her mouth, her nose, and her golden eyes. Her eyes were trained on him, scanning his features briefly, before she said, “You look like a tool.” He laughed. “Grow out your hair,” she said again.

“I’ll think about it,” he said, sweeping his hand through his hair one more time. “How’s school?”

“It’s a pain in the ass,” she said, brushing back her own hair from her face. “My students are idiots.”

“They can’t be that bad if you’re teaching them.” He gave her a toothy grin that she did not return.

“They can and they are,” she said, turning the phone so that her entire face was in view.

“So what’s going on?”

“Nothing. I just haven’t talked to you in a while.”

“Years,” she said, moving away from the screen of the phone.

“Not even. I called you last month. You didn’t pick up.”

“I was teaching class,” she said, scowling. “And I did call you back.” He watched her face remain stony, her frown deepening. “The last time we talked was when I called you from the hospital.” He knew she was right. The last year and a half they had grown cold on each other, but to be honest they had been avoiding each other for much longer.

“Yeah, Ada Rick said you were recovering from ‘jetlag’ from the other side.” He saw her roll her eyes, but she remained silent. “He thinks you went to heaven or some shit. Did you see angels, cuz?” He grinned, trying to make light of it.

“You’re so white,” she said and it was his turn to frown. “There aren’t any angels in Indian heaven. If there were those Native ghosts would run them off like Sitting Bull.”

“So what do they got instead? Coyotes with wings,” he said, scanning her face for any sign that she understood what he was saying. Her face remained immobile. “Gates made of golden fry bread?”

“You’re a dumb Indian, you know that,” she said, picking up the phone and lifting it closer to her face. “There are some things that no one should talk about.”

“Like Native heaven?”

“Like being dead.”

“I’m just trying to make conversation.”

“You make conversation like a white boy, cuz. Don’t think I don’t see that,” she said, the



screen shaking as she moved around her room. “You’re calling out of the blue and asking questions about things you don’t need to know about.”

“I wanted to know you’re okay, asshole,” he said, his voice a little harsher and louder than he wanted. “I’m allowed to call you, right?”

She paused, the screen stilling. Her face held such exhaustion. “What do you want, Valerie?” She held his gaze as a loud silence moved between them.

“Nothing.” He saw the slight purse of her lips as he disconnected the line.

Vincent decided on the bus that the long hours at the office were getting to him. He was working too hard—staring at his screen for hours at a time was straining his eyes. His vision was doubling and it was getting harder to concentrate on the elements he was creating. He was having headaches, but that might have been from talking with Riley.

He also almost missed the last 17 bus back into town. He fumed about it for most of the hour-long ride, mostly as a means of pushing his more troubling thoughts to the back of his mind. He would have made Wick pay for a cab if he'd missed it. Although, knowing the man, he'd more likely have 'suggested' Vincent just sleep in the office. "You'd be early for once." He rolled his eyes at that, hating how easily he could conjure up the other man's voice.

It was well near one by the time the 17 bus parked in the metro station. Still, Downtown was alive with the noise of drunken patrons. Music spilled out of bar doors to pool at the feet of the huddled cluster of smokers. Thick clouds made of heated words and cigarettes hovered overhead.

The Catalyst was hosting a local favorite, The Devil Makes Three, and the streets were livelier than most nights. Patrons lingered just outside the double doors and smoke was pluming from the upper windows and from crowds of people on the sidewalk.

Vincent walked quickly around them, clutching his coat tighter around his throat. The chill dug its fingers beneath his collar. The voices of the crowd, gruff white noise smoothed with liquor, followed him for two blocks. He turned onto Spruce and the world became silent. A few people were sitting on their stoops, enjoying the winter cold with a cigarette.

He jogged up the porch steps of the Victorian he shared with his three housemates. A couple, Marnie and Eddie, shared the upper floor with him. She did work at the Seymour Center,

training seals and giving talks to visiting elementary classes in addition to her work in the labs. She hated kids. Eddie studied at the university in the History of Consciousness department and was well-spoken when he decided to speak, which, from what little Vincent had actually seen of him, was not often. Marnie spoke a lot. Her voice filled the large house with phrases like “chromodorid nudibranchs,” “taxonomic instability,” and “morphological.”

The third, Tawnie, lived in the back room off the kitchen. She was a musician of some sort; Vincent never really got a straight answer as to what kind of music she played. Some nights, when he wasn’t too tired to make food, he heard her wailing and the sound of metal scraping metal, which was accompanied by dissonant piano chords. He didn’t see her often at all, but since he’d started working for Wick he hadn’t been home much either. His existence in the house had become peripheral.

The lock on the front door stuck. It was the cold and the lock was old. He pressed it a little harder, trying not to bang his shoulder too hard against the doorframe. Like most things in the house, the door creaked. The lock gave. He entered and closed the door quietly behind him.

He took the stairs leading to his room two at a time, trying to avoid making too much noise, as Eddie was a light sleeper. He wouldn’t complain, but Vincent didn’t want to bother with the guilt of waking him from a sound sleep. Still, a few of the stairs creaked beneath his weight, the old wood groaning.

Once in his room, he gently closed the door and groped around in the dark for the space heater. The house was drafty, the walls were thinly insulated, and the windows didn’t sit in their tracks like they should. When he’d first moved in, the window above his bed wouldn’t close completely. A small gap of about the width of a pencil—Vincent had measured—was left between the sill and the window. He had slammed it shut once and it never opened again, which

was fine with Vincent at the moment since it was colder than tits out.

Finding the heater, he turned it on and moved across the room in the dark to the lamp. The bay window at the other end of his room let in most of the cold air. He'd stuffed tissue paper in the cracks, which only somewhat helped.

With the room finally warming up, he shed his bag and outer layers until he was stripped down to his sweater and jeans. He sat on the edge of his bed, a hand-me-down futon from Ikea gifted to him by an ex-girlfriend. While unlacing his boots, his phone rang in his pocket. He saw his Aunt Vera's number and photo come up across the screen. "Hi, auntie," he answered, toeing his shoes off.

"Have you talked to your cousin yet," she said—because Manning women don't ask, Vincent thought.

"I have not," he lied. He unlaced his other boot.

He heard her suck at her teeth. "Why not?"

"Auntie, I'm busy," he said, kicking his boot across the room. "I'm sure she is, too. She's working on her master's now."

"Ah! PhD," said, her voice indignant. "She's going to be a doctor."

"A doctor that can't give shots," he said, holding his phone between his ear and shoulder as he unbuttoned his jeans. "Useless."

"The only useless doctor is Doctor Phil," she replied.

"He can't give shots either." Wiggling out of his jeans, Vincent lay down on his bed, feeling a wave of exhaustion overtake him. "So what's going on?"

"Am I not allowed to call you, Mr. Busy?"

"When it's like one in the morning, no, you are not allowed to call me." He tucked his

hand beneath his shirt, feeling the slick fabric of his binder across his chest. “Why are you even up,” he asked. He picked at the material just beneath his breasts. A momentary relief, the binding digging into the skin in his side. He fingered the tender skin, knowing it was inflamed from the long day of use.

“I’m an old woman, Vincent. I don’t sleep.” He heard rustling on the line; he imagined that she was in her kitchen making a late night snack of commod cheese and bread with a side of Lay’s chips. He knew when he called to her tomorrow, she would half-heartedly complain about heartburn and how her feet were too fat to fit in her boots. It was true, now that she was retired; Vera’s body had changed. In her younger days, when Vincent was still small enough to sit in her lap, Vera had been muscular. Unlike Gwendolyn, she was stocky, with a wide torso set over wider hips. Before she had Riley, she helped her brothers brand the cattle and bring them down from the hills into the valley for the winter. Her arms were thick and solid. Hugging her was like hugging a rock. But now in her fifties, Vincent likened her softened muscles to a Rubens painting: all curves and plump contentment. “Did you get my package?”

“I didn’t know you sent me anything,” he said, rolling over and pushing off the bed. He went to his door, where his housemates usually left his mail. “You didn’t have to.”

“I didn’t tell you because I knew you would tell me that.” He found a small package about the size of his hand tucked into the corner between his door and the wall. He held his phone between his shoulder and ear again, opening the box. “I thought this would help with chafing. It’s also good for your face, too. You said you were breaking out.”

He audibly groaned, but smiled at the small bottle of tea tree oil in his hand. “Is this some Native voodoo?”

She barked out a laugh. “Yes, all the way from Australia.”

“There are Native people there, too, Auntie,” he said, trying to pull off his shirt while holding onto his phone. “How’d you hear about this?”

“Doctor Oz.” The sound of a microwave dinging punctuated her words. “He’s a good doctor.”

“A real medicine man,” he agreed, slipping his arms free of his t-shirt. “Hold on. I’m putting you on speaker phone,” he said. He set the phone down on his bed and quickly pulled his binder off. The skin on his chest sagged, his pectoral muscles obvious beneath. He lifted his breasts to look at the angry red marks across the side of his ribs and across his torso.

Vera clicked her tongue, before saying, “He’s as much of a kook as Phil, but at least he can give shots.”

“The true sign of any good medicine man.” Satisfied with his examination, he picked up the bottle of oil and poured it into his hand. The strong smell made his nose crinkle and once applied to his skin it burned. He fanned the wet area with his hand. The cool air eased the stinging.

“He’s a kook, too, but smart enough to steal his medicine from those native people in Australia,” she said.

“I don’t think Doctor Oz stole that from the Aboriginals.”

“Some white man did. They’re good at taking things that don’t belong to them.”

“Like the oil.”

“Like everything, nephew. Does it work?”

“It burns.”

“Good. That means it’s doing something.”

“I don’t know if I want to put this on my face.”

“Fine, but don’t come complaining to me when you can’t get a date because your face looks like your Auntie Aileen’s fry bread.”

He laughed, picking up his phone and turning off the speaker. “I’ll remember that.” He lay back down on his bed.

“Your voice sounds good. It’s cracking less,” she said. It made him happy to know she noticed.

“It’s happening less, but it still happens if I get too excited. I’m liking it.”

“Everything else going well?”

“Work is making me crazy, but having health care is really great right now. I think I might be able to get surgery soon.”

“Good, then I don’t have to keep sending you things you refuse to use.”

“What about you? Is everything okay? You don’t usually call me this late.”

“Old ladies don’t sleep,” she said. “I haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“I called you three days ago.”

“That’s a while. Riley hasn’t called in weeks. She hasn’t even sent a text message.”

“She’s probably still settling into the semester. She’s going to be a doctor, remember.”

“You should go visit her. She’d probably like that.”

“Auntie, Portland is a lot farther away than you think it is.” Riley had been in Oregon for about three months now. The doctors kept her an extra few weeks in the hospital due to some unspecified concerns. Physically, she was fine, but her mental health was in question; her character had drastically changed. Right before the accident she was known to laugh real big, her cheeks turning a dark red as she gulped for air. She wore mischievous smiles and told dirty jokes with the uncles. After the accident, she had become quieter, staring at people when they talked to

her. It made people nervous, her gaze was too present and filled with intent. As it was being described to him, Vincent thought about Riley's demeanor after Gwendolyn's death. Riley had become just as closed off as she was back then. "I can't anyway. The project at work is coming up to a deadline and I need to be here." He only felt a little guilty saying that.

"Do they really need so many trees right now?"

"I do more than that," he sighed, tucking his arm behind his head. "And besides, she might not even want to see me."

"Why wouldn't she want to see you? Did you do something," Vera accused, her voice straining a little.

"No, I didn't do a thing." His voice was defensive and he knew it. "We just haven't talked in a long time."

"What happened to you two? I used to have to call you to find out what she was up to."

"We're both really busy, auntie. She's working on school and I'm working a lot."

"But you call me, Mr. Busy."

"I do, but only to make sure you haven't run off with some cowboy with a sweet voice." He heard her laugh. "Have you?"

"I don't have time for cowboys. I'm too busy." He had to laugh at that. "Call her at least. She's being an asshole and not picking up my calls."

"I haven't talked to her in a while, but that does sounds like her."

He heard Vera make a noise that sounded like surprise. "She's different than her usual, difficult self. Lately, she's gotten real prickly."

"Like a cactus or Baptist?"

He heard her nails clacking against the receiver. "Somewhere in between. When she was



here, I'd ask her to do something and she just—she just does it.”

“Isn't that a good thing?”

“Yes, but it's the way she did it.” She paused. “She'd get up real stiff like she'd been running all night and just look at me like I slapped her.”

“What did the doctors say?”

“That she's fine. That this might just be an adjustment period.”

“Does she have someone to talk to out there in Oregon?”

“Like friends? She still talks to that one girl. Becky?”

“No, I mean a professional. Like a therapist.”

“She's not crazy.” He heard her sigh deeply. In his mind's eye he could see her broad shoulders rise and fall heavily. “She makes me crazy, though.”

“Yeah, that sounds like her.”

“Yeah, that sounds like you, too. You're both so busy being city Indians you forgot about your old, tired, long-suffering elders sitting here in the cold—”

“Hey! Stop that. I know for a fact Ada Rick fixed your heater and you have never once or ever been ‘old’ or ‘tired.’” He ran his hand over his face, too aware of the unevenness of his skin. “And yes, I'll try calling her, but no promises that she'll pick up.”

“Ah, you're such a good nephew,” she said and Vincent was sure that she was smiling that wide grin that showed off her coffee stained teeth. “Make sure you get her to come home for the holidays.” Vincent tried to protest, but Vera was off and running with her demands. “I better see you at the table, too. None of this ‘busy’ stuff. You can draw trees here, too, you know.”

“I'll see what I can do.”

As a means of signing off, Vera said, “Try some of that stuff on your face. You never

know, it might be okay.”

His aunt hung up then, effectively ending their conversation. It was a family trait that he hadn't noticed until now. Women in his family never said good-bye no matter the medium of conversation: phone calls, emails, face-to-face. They would just let their sentences fade into silence or cut the line before he could get a good-bye in. They liked ending things with force and definite finality. Gwendolyn had been like that with his father.

Vincent's father, Albert Coldwater, wasn't the most interesting kind of person. Vera had called him “mediocre as mayonnaise,” which wasn't bad, but was definitely inadequate in Vera's eyes. He worked hard, though, and never cheated on Gwendolyn. In the end, they spent ten years together, eight of which Vincent was present for, before his father's average-ness got the best of him.

From what Vincent was able to remember, his father was plain, lacking any sense of imagination or passion. Although, it was equally likely that he didn't know that such things existed. He absorbed ideas and suffocated them in himself until they came out rotten. Albert, as plain as he was, expected the same of his wife and child, never to stand out or make a fuss about themselves. They were expected to blend into the walls like him.

Unfortunately for him, Gwendolyn Manning was not an average woman. She was intelligent and somehow uncanny. Her brothers and sisters told Vincent stories of a seven-year-old Gwendolyn Manning staring down bears and riding wild horses bareback. Ada Rick swore—one hand over his heart and the other raised to the heavens—that his baby sister could shoot a Clobber Girl can from 50 yards away, bareback, at full gallop. “I would not lie about the dead.” Vincent didn't believe those stories because it made his mother sound superhuman and more dangerous than he would ever like to believe his mother was.

But Vera liked to remind him, especially after her passing, how powerful his mother was. Her favorite reminder was the story of when Gwendolyn was seven months pregnant with him. She was in the parking lot of an Albertson's, struggling to sit behind the wheel of her brown Hyundai, when a young man poked his hand through the open window and pointed a gun at Gwendolyn's beautiful face. "Ah! In her prime, your mom looked like Buffy Saint-Marie on Sesame Street," Vera always exclaimed. The young man yelled at her to get out of the car, pressed the muzzle to her temple. Gwendolyn did not yell, she simply slapped his hand away and snatched up a fistful of the boy's shirt. She tugged at his clothes, pulling him almost entirely into the car, sweetly asking him, "Do you not see I'm pregnant, young man? Do you not see I am filled with life?" The boy wrenched himself away, running for his life. When Vera told that story, Gwendolyn Manning would just smile and let her sister finish. "When she got home, your dad gave her hell. Screamed at her for causing a ruckus for \$40 worth of groceries. But I'm sure he was just scared because now he knew, *for a fact*, his wife was all sweet as well as fire."

Vincent was an equal balance of both his parents: quiet, but unique; blended in, but made a scene. When he was young, he would run with the boys, tattering his Sunday clothes. White stockings turned black from running on asphalt, dresses were torn from jumping in bushes, and satin bows were pulled from long black braids from fighting in the church parking lot after Sunday school. He was an average boy in a pretty girl's body.

Back then Vincent thought, still thought actually, that Albert saw saw that in him. His father knew his daughter was a boy. Or at the very least, knew he was strange; a crooked nail to be beaten into place. Vincent was certain of it because of the way his father looked at him across the dinner table. His thin lips would twitch whenever Vincent spoke, talked about a baseball game he'd help win. He knew his father could hear the longing in his voice when he talked about

a friend trying out for football. He saw the discomfort when he walked through doorways with his hair stuffed into baseball caps and his knees bloody from another rough game. So when Albert grabbed him the first and only time, Vincent had been expecting it. What he didn't expect was his mother stepping in between them.

Albert struck her once, open palm across the face, and that was enough for Gwendolyn Manning. She picked herself off the ground, packed up a suitcase for her and Vincent, and left the house within the span of twenty minutes. In all his averageness, Vincent's father sat silently at the kitchen table, his hands clasped in front of him on the floral print tablecloth. Vincent remembered his father looking relieved and frightened all at once.

They took a Greyhound from Los Angeles to Boise. Vera met them at the bus station. Her yellow pickup was a blot of sun against the gray winter afternoon. When they arrived at his aunt's house, the snow was falling thinly in the valley.

His father had called once. His mother had taken the call, but only to be clear about her intentions. "Albert Coldwater, I am not a punching bag and I'm not your wife anymore. We're not coming back, I took what me and Valerie needed." He cringed at the memory of his dead name. "The divorce papers are in the mail and if you know what's good for you, you better have them signed next time I call you."

She hadn't slammed the receiver down like Vincent had thought she would. She had laid it gently into its cradle and just stared. Her shoulders sagged. Defeat or something like it weighed down her long, thin arms.

"Sizzy, don't sit on the phone like that," Vera had called from the kitchen. The smell of slow cooked beans and frying bread filled the house with warmth and smoke. "Check the beans. I think they're burning."

He watched her move numbly across the living room, her feet dragging against the shaggy carpet. She stopped, catching sight of him standing in the hallway staring at her. Gwendolyn Manning was not a small woman, but in that moment Vincent knew he could have folded her in the palms of his tiny hands. “Valerie, baby, go outside.”

Vincent remembered not wanting to move from that spot. He felt rooted to that spot in the hallway. The shag carpet opened up beneath him, letting his feet take hold of the earth beneath the trailer.

Riley, all forty pounds of her, had grabbed him and pulled him toward the back porch. They played in the few inches of snow until their noses were chapped and red. Riley showed him how to make a gopher trap out of sagebrush and he showed her how to draw a cube in the snow. They played until the wind howled so loud their ears hurt, then stayed out a little longer. They played until the sun set and they had to shuffle their way back to the house in the dark.

That night in bed, Riley and him in matching dressing gowns, he heard his mother crying. At the time, he was certain he was the cause; that he was wrong. He listened to her muffled cries a moment longer before he felt Riley pull him closer. She tucked his head under her chin while he held tightly to her thin wrist.

Helicopters—framed in the windshield of Frank’s Range Rover—flew as low as they dared above the packed 17 Freeway. The dark forest of pines along the sloping mountainside and along the road turned white under the helicopter’s searchlights. Those lights were unnecessary, as the road was already lit up by the thousands of cars and floodlights; the freeway looked like a snake that had eaten a string of Christmas lights: bulging with iridescence.

Inside the cabin of the truck, the back haphazardly filled with supplies, Frank sat gripping the steering wheel. His knuckles were white against the worn, black wheel cover. They turned pink then white again as he nervously flexed his fingers.

His face was pale, the stubble on his chin looking darker against his sallow skin. His eyes were set on the tinted back window of the car in front of him, where two women sat. The headlights of his car washed out the color of the trunk of their car, but their brake lights blinked an angry red: caution, caution, caution.

Their cars were stuck just past Pasatiempo, the large green freeway sign hanging overhead. The long line of cars wouldn’t be moving anytime soon.

The radio played, the faceplate glowing minty green. The announcer’s voice, a soothing NPR baritone, very calmly outlined the events of the last 24 hours. “It is uncertain what is currently happening.”

Static.

“A lot of information has been streaming in since the first wave of riots began on Capitol Hill. Unrest has spread rapidly through the major cities along the coast. The recent crackdown on immigration has been the cause of many protests within the last few months. In what seems like an overwhelming show of public—”

The car lurched forward, the truck’s headlights illuminating the inside of the car in front.

Static played a moment before the announcer's voice returned.

“—the recovered have repeatedly reported seeing small humanoid beings, not much taller than a child, before passing out.” Static.

The car jostled, struck by some unseen debris. The wind picked up, the branches of the eucalyptus trees along the freeway waving wildly above. In the dying light, they looked overgrown.

“—police have made no official statement, but request that people stay calm.”

The program played on, switching to a report on the overwhelming traffic going out of major cities.

Frank refocused on the two women reclining in their seats, their feet propped up on the dash and their hands sticking out of the side windows. Their fingers shifted in and out of the beam of his headlights. Their relaxed posture and the silence that surrounded them contrasted with Frank's white knuckles on the steering wheel. Their car wasn't as fully packed as his truck.

Framed in the back window of the hatchback was a Costco-size provision of potato chips with the name “Kirkland” printed across the box. The container moved suddenly, pressing against the glass as a shadow crawled from the trunk to the backseat. It slid toward the driver's seat. The women didn't react to the motion of the box or the shadow sitting behind them. Their hands limply dangled at the wrist. More movement came from the back of the car, the shadow ducking from sight. The car rocked as duffle bags and backpacks were shoved against the side windows and the figure moved into the light.

It was skeletal, its skin tight and transparent against its bones. Its face was wet and smiling as it stared out the back window.

“The fires at three refineries in lower Los Angeles County have finally been contained,”

the announcer reported.

The creature slammed its hands against the rear windshield, dirty thin fingers marking up the glass. It reared its head back, black hair falling over its face, and opened its mouth, a gaping hole filled from front to back with wide, sharp teeth. He watched it shake its head as it threw its arms against the glass, rocking the car. It repeated the action and the glass gave as cracks began to form beneath the meat of its palms.

“Wilmington, Long Beach, and east Torrance neighborhoods are still unsafe.”

Frank reached across the middle console, groping for the glove compartment, but keeping his eyes on the creature. The cracks grew thicker, spider-webbing around its fists. He opened the panel as one of its arms burst through and retreated back through the broken glass. Rifling through the neatly folded receipts and pamphlets, his hand dipped under the weight of the revolver.

The thing was pulling at the glass, using the opening it had made to try to rip the glass out of the back door. Through the small opening, he saw flashes of its face, its mouth closed, but no less wide. He raised his hand, leaning his body against the dashboard in an attempt to hide from the thing trying to get out, and lined up a shot as it began to throw itself more forcefully against the window.

“Do not return to your homes,” the announcer warned.

The hatchback’s window was torn from the back door and flung against the hood of his car. Frank hunched over the middle console, gripping the revolver tighter; his body fell over into the passenger seat onto a pair of legs. He looked up into a face without distinct features. It had a mouth and indentations where its eyes and nose should be. Its mouth flapped open and closed. It leaned forward, filling up his vision.



“It’s unsafe,” the announcer said, his voice crackling as Vincent stopped the playback. The mechanics, for the most part, functioned as they should. He was pleased with the way the trees moved, gently swaying in a summer breeze that he knew was warm and smelled of dust. He had been stuck on that stretch of highway too many times to not know its smell and be familiar with the curves of its cracked asphalt roads.

“Can you fix it?” Wick looked at one of the two computer screens on Vincent’s desk and stood right behind the designer’s shoulder. The audio playback was not fitting like he had hoped. The NPC’s mouth moved too quickly and its jaw dropped too low as it formed certain consonants. ‘L’ or a long ‘O’ caused the NPC to lose all control of the lower half of its head. Even as it attempted the next line of dialogue, its chin dropped further and further down its chest. “I mean; I guess you have to fix it. Deadline is coming up pretty fast.”

Vincent looked up at Wick, watching the playback reflected in his perfectly square glasses. The NPC stood still with its jaw hanging down about its belt. Wick reached around Vincent for his mouse, starting the playback again. Vincent made a small noise at the back of his throat at the man’s action. The jaw reformed but fell as the NPC’s lips formed the words.

“It’s the algorithm.” Vincent hit pause as the NPC attempted to speak again, its jaw flopping against its stomach again. He pointed to the NPC’s sagging face. “It would have broken otherwise.”

“So you can fix it.” Wick leaned in closer to the screen, moving too close to Vincent’s face. This close, he could smell the awful pine-scented cologne he was certain the other man had doused his button-down flannel in. It was more akin to Pine-Sol than the forest fresh scent he was sure Wick was looking for. Vincent watched as he scratched at the stubble on his chin, which completed the lumberjack aesthetic.

“That’s David’s department.”

“David’s making headway on his own project.”

David was not making headway on much of anything. He was still struggling with the three-week-old notes from Wick on the game physics. He knew Wick didn’t like the way the PCs rabbit-hopped over assets—fallen trees, low walls, dead bodies—instead of jumping. “They don’t even bend their knees, man. No one jumps like that,” he had said. This was one item on Wick’s single-spaced page of notes for David, who had taken the critiques well enough. That morning Vincent had seen him outside, looking pale and dead around the eyes, lighting a cigarette with a single sheet of paper.

“I’m still working on the next set of designs for Friday’s meeting.” The 3D models were mostly done and rendering on his main screen. Rendering took time, but that time was always productive for Vincent. He sketched the next areas, six altogether, and reviewed the notes from the last meeting. He wasn’t idle like Wick seemed to assume he was.

“They’re still loading, Vince.” He hated being called Vince. It made him sound like a 1950’s Chevy mechanic wearing a grease-spotted jumpsuit and pomade-slicked hair. It reminded him too much of his dad. “This shouldn’t take too long.” Wick pulled back and walked away from Vincent’s desk.

He pulled his headphones on and closed the playback window. “Wilderness” played as the view of the Pogonip rendered in full color and texture across his screen. Vincent oriented the camera at the beginning of the Spring Box Trail, looking down over the rolling hills and into the valley. He adjusted the lighting, the sun 12 fingers in the powder blue sky, so it showed it was 3 PM overlooking the Monterey Bay. He removed the morning mist, for now, a sheer texture falling down the mountains and slipping through the trees, to reveal the remains of the town

below: the steeples of Holy Cross Church, the hollowed out face of the clock tower, and the cluttered streets of the Circles.

Even from that distance, one could see that the Wharf was broken into two sections. Vincent had stuck a fishing boat, the stern jutting out of the walkway at an angle, just before the strip of shops along the boardwalk as a border marker. He panned to the left; the lighthouse was left alone as another marker.

He pulled the camera back and scrolled over to the thick forest and stopped the camera on an aerial view of the koi pond, then zoomed in so that he could peer into the water. He placed models of the koi into the pond; they sat suspended at the perfect depth for showing off their orange-gold coloring. He raised the lights, turning back time by three hours. The map brightened so that he was able to see where he had left off last.

He followed the trail, a recreation of the one he often took through the Pogonip, toward a specific spot he had hiked many times before. Scrolling over the area where highway 9 intersected train tracks, he noticed a clearing that he did not remember making, a few yards off the path. Bush and ivy had been trimmed back and a hastily made structure had been set up. He zoomed in, the camera phasing through the tree trunks and brush.

The structure, a simple lean-to, was built toward the back of the clearing. He looked closely at the ties, green saplings and ivy, and could see the intricate way they were tied around the scaffold of thinned trees. It rendered very nicely, he thought. Pulling back, he turned the camera downward as something caught his eye. The remains of a fire were scattered across the dirt. Around the debris were clear footprints.

He pulled the camera close enough to see the brand: Doc Martens. This detail was interesting; the outline of the lettering was so clear even though the grain of the dirt was a basic

textured skin. He tried changing the ground to a matte brown, no grain detail, but the letters remained as they were: clear and precise.

The camera panned over the rest of the site finding more evidence that someone had been in the area. A slim tree had been felled cleanly with what he assumed was a well taken care of ax. A few steps away the ground was disturbed—redwood ivy had been pulled out by its roots—and a small indent was left in the wet earth.

He killed the music as the song repeated, leaving him in a still silence that made him a little ill. His head was in a vacuum, the air aimlessly bouncing against his eardrum. The branches of the trees moved but did not rustle as they did while he was on one of his hikes. He pulled up another window, laying it over the scene before him. He turned off the wind and his stomach settled a bit. Closing the window, he saw movement in the upper left corner of the screen.

Quickly he scrolled closer, following the movement of the branches and bushes. He caught glimpses of green flannel and the back of calves in mud-splattered jeans as a figure zigzagged across his screen, its arms tugging at trees limbs, and pushed through the bushes. Vincent moved through fallen trees and over a stream, frozen but no less glassy, as the thing in front of him ducked and leaped over objects in its way. It moved quickly. Vincent lost sight of it as it jumped between two boulders.

He zoomed out, looking down at its erratic movements from above, to see where it was going. A cliff, a stand-in for the map's border, was just ahead. It wouldn't be able to move further than those parameters.

He watched as it shed its shirt, a flutter of green disappearing into the loam. As it ran, its image shifted, a disruption of color and form. Its color darkened, blending in with the woods. From its back sprouted wings, feathers of white and mottled brown, that overlaid gray and desert

red fur. Its wings unfurled and retracted as it leaped over the uneven terrain of the forest floor.

He double clicked at the edge of the cliff, just a few yards ahead of it, zooming in quickly. It was undeterred as he turned the camera toward it. Snarling with sharp teeth, it lurched at him. Without thinking, Vincent screenshot the image as it moved through him and off the cliff. Vincent spun the camera around, seeing it unfold its wings as its feet lifted off the ground. He imagined the sound of feathers and the beating of wings.

It glided into the unknown; the place beyond the border, which was blank, gray matte screen. Its body shrinking until it disappeared into nothing.

He stared at the spot, his eyes holding the after image of the creature's body, the outline of its tensed back muscles holding up its wings as they stretched out across its shoulders.

The headphones were snatched from his ears, the thick silence pulled away as well, as a hand grasped his shoulder. "Vincent."

He jumped and turned with his hands held high. David, laughing, stood over him. His eyes were hollow and wearier than they had been that morning. His t-shirt was twisted at an awkward angle, the neck stretched low over his chest. "Wick said you were fixing the algorithm," he said, his voice hopeful and scratched from cigarettes and a few hours of rest. "Are you done with your shit already?"

"He said I should do it since you're doing so well."

"That asshole, he doesn't know shit, does he?"

"I can look at it."

David nodded, seemingly relieved, but apprehensive. "It's not that big of a deal, man, if you need more time on your shit."

"What's one more thing, right?"

“Yeah, one more thing becomes another.” He smiled, leaning against Vincent’s desk.

“He’s really holding that investment shit over our heads.” Vincent agreed, Wick was pulling rank more since his dad had begun paying for their little project: holding a lot of meetings that added up to Wick airing out his displeasure over small things. “He doesn’t even code, man. What does he know about this shit anyway?”

“He doesn’t have to if he’s paying for it,” Vincent countered.

“He’s not even doing that.”

Vincent just shrugged, leaning his seat back to reveal his screen, empty and gray.

“I see you’re not doing much either.”

“I’m doing your job now, remember?”

“Fuck you, dude,” David laughed, pushing off the desk and making his way back to his own worktable.

Vincent waited a moment for David’s screen to brighten with activity, streams of code and cascading windows. He clicked through his files, not immediately finding the image. A moment of uncertainty passed. He might have been mistaken, the lack of sleep and fresh air were getting to him. He was deprived of too many vitamins or was not getting enough sunlight. His mind was wilting under the pressure of the project.

In the end, it showed up: screenshot 11-23-2016. He hesitated to open up the file. What he thought he might have seen was, at this point, still theoretical; it was still possible for this to all add up to a lack of sleep, a lucid dream that was fueled by too much coffee. It could have been the extra sugar he’d been eating or his shot, the rush of hormones doing something weird with his brain. He selected the icon and then deleted it.

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The settlement, a small swath of land at the end of a long winding dirt road, was only large enough to house a single cabin and a shed that stood off to the side. The rest of the area was divided on either side of the dirt road. Behind the house, trees rose up high like giant sentinels, their heads hidden in the early fog still rolling down into the valley below. In front, a truck came to a quick stop before the cabin's porch steps. The truck's tires made a deep gouge in the muddy earth.

In the early morning light, the damage from the night before became much more apparent. A busted headlight, cracked windshield, and a deep dent on the driver's side, which was the least of the damage. The attack on the highway—the things that had eaten and killed the two women in the hatchback on the 17—had left the interior shredded. The supplies that were tied to the roof were all but gone.

Frank leaned forward against the steering wheel. His shoulders rose to his ears with every deep breath he took. The passenger—a blonde, middle-aged woman—reached across the console. She rested her hand between his shoulder blades; the ring on her finger caught some dull light that made it look a little brighter than it should be. The man was sobbing now, his arms wrapped around the wheel to pull his body flush against it.

“Dad, it's okay,” a voice called from the backseat. Diagonal from the man, a teenage boy with dark hair and a slim build sat pressed against the door. “We're alive.”

They exited the car, the woman and boy quickly coming around either side of the truck to flank the man. He collapsed into the woman's side as the boy pulled at the side of his hip.

In this way, they moved down toward the edge of the clearing that overlooked the valley. The forest was thick for some miles, but there was a lake and nearby campfire smoke rose up from among the trees to blend into the snowcapped peaks of the mountain range beyond them.

From there the sun began to rise, turning the sky orange and gold. The family now dwarfed by the scene before them. The Title card faded in: [Title].

The soundtrack played on a loop.

Vincent didn't bother looking up from his sketchpad. He had seen this clip a thousand and six times during pre-production. He was pre-production. He was particularly proud of the protagonist's face reflecting off the broken windshield. There was something amazing about the way the light seemed to be scattered by the crack that ran across the glass.

What he didn't like so much was the music. That was David's choice. His little brother was a music major at UC and had offered to do this for minimal money. Maybe they should have invested a little more money, Vincent thought, because this was mediocre. It was a generic orchestral sound that would fade in and out through the opening, giving little or too much at the wrong time. The dialogue, all two lines of it, was rendered comical by the score's dramatic accenting.

It surprised him that no one had laughed or at least snickered at that. He was a little surprised that no one was speaking now. Looking up from his sketchpad, Vincent scanned the room. The entire team—all 15 members—sat around the table in deep thought or boredom. The interns, three undergrads David most likely bullied into helping around the office for resume credit and a recommendation, stood nervously against the far wall. Two were shifting from foot to foot. A young woman with auburn hair intently scribbled down notes onto a pad of paper.

Looking at these three individuals, Vincent realized he had forgotten their names. He was certain he'd heard them introduce themselves at some point, but the memory just wouldn't surface. David, in his usual way, had not even bothered introducing them in the last meeting. He had pointed to them and announced, "The interns," as if that was their collective name. For how



little they spoke, that might be accurate. The trio had over the previous week seemed to come to an agreement to dutifully orbit the office as a single, functioning unit. The young woman was permanently placed in between the two men.

Vincent sat back in his seat, leaning it far enough so that he was out of Wick's line of sight. This meeting is going to be painful, he thought, balancing his sketchpad on his knee. The sketches for the new NPC—raiders, settlers, and player companions—still needed work. Like everything else, he thought, as Wick spoke first.

“Do we need that dialogue in there? It seems a little heavy handed.” He leaned back into his chair, tapping the end of his pen against his knee. Vincent straightened his chair, moving his work to the table.

“I thought it was a good beginning to what the story is about,” one of the interns said. He worked with David on the programming.

“Exactly. Do they need to know that so soon?”

“Know what? It's two lines,” David said, typing something out on his phone.

“Right. And they're the first two lines from one of the PCs. It should mean something. Or less.”

David gave an exhausted sigh, tossing his phone on the table. It slid across the table and onto the floor to stop at the feet of one of the interns, who seemed horrified. “It's two fucking lines, Wick. Fix it in post or something.”

“We're trying to tell a story here,” the other man fired back, leaning forward onto the table. Vincent sat straight in his chair, holding his notebook closer to his face.

“I get that, but we're not breaking any new ground with this. The mechanics are all third gen shit.” David flicked his fingers toward the intern, gesturing for his phone. “It's a pretty

straightforward horror-adventure set-up. Apocalypse. Mutation. Kill,” David said, resuming typing on his phone as if nothing had happened.

“Feel free to come up with something new, David. No one’s holding you back,” Wick shot back. “It would be good if the technical was on par with the story.” David began to interject, but Wick plowed forward. “Which is still not entirely there. And we can’t rely on Vincent’s artistic magic with the graphics.” Vincent sat a little lower in his seat, trying to hide in his notebook. The gesture David did in response was something Vincent could only describe as a jerk-off motion. “Did anyone else want to share their opinion on this?”

The intern who David had tossed his cellphone at, raised her hand. “This isn’t class,” Wick said. She lowered her hand. The fidgeting ones, two dark haired young men with the typical thick-rimmed glasses, seemed to freeze on either side of her.

“I was just thinking that the music was off-putting.” This garnered a sharp gasp from David. “I mean, it doesn’t match the tone of the story or the visual design. It’s too soft.” Wick seemed more impressed with how offended David looked than the intern’s critique. “If we’re going to give them something expected like David said, we should stick to that. For continuity’s sake,” she added, catching the harsh stares coming from across the table.

“Vincent,” Wick asked, leaning his entire body on the table to look at him. “Your thoughts?”

“I agree,” he said, intentionally placing his pencil and notebook down on the table. “The story needs work and the music detracts from the emotional potential of the dialogue.”

Somewhere in the middle of his critique, Vincent felt like he was in his old English 100 class trying to answer a question about a reading he hadn’t done. “I feel that some research might be necessary if we’re going to continue with this storyline.”

In general, the others seemed to agree with him. Wick nodded and David was flat out ignoring him. “That’s the other thing,” spoke again, getting everyone’s attention away from Vincent. “Do we have someone to check the cultural . . . sensitivity of that storyline?”

“How do you mean?”

“The storyline, it seems obvious that some of the characters are Native American. The settlers in the valley. Are we going to address that at all?”

“What’s to address? They’re settlers occupying a primo apocalyptic spot,” David said, seeming to lose more of his patience.

“They’re not though, right?” she asked, looking in Vincent’s direction as if hoping he’d back her up. He didn’t, but she continued on regardless. “I mean, the mock-ups for the village have some obvious Native American influences.” That made Vincent cringe a little. “The artwork in some of the houses and the leader’s name. Red-deer.” Vincent had not signed off on that one. He wanted something more generic like Smith or Jones.

“I can see your point,” Wick began, “but that was not our intention and it doesn’t seem so blatant that we need to address it in any special way.” The intern looked a little uncomfortable, her eyes flitting between Wick and Vincent, who was struggling to look anywhere else but in her direction. “And if it turns out that is the direction we’re going to take, I’m sure we can find a consultant to deal with it.” Vincent understood that everyone was trying to be subtle about it, but he knew everyone was looking at him. He didn’t expect Wick to say anything about it, though. “Right, Vincent?”

Vincent nodded and looked up to catch the intern’s eye. The look the woman gave him, somewhere between anger and disappointment, surprisingly hurt. This was the first time he’d ever taken any interest or even acknowledged this woman, but her opinion of him suddenly

mattered.

“Alright everyone, we’ve got deadlines. Let’s act like we want to get this done.” Wick adjourned the meeting. “Vincent, can we talk in the writer’s room?” Wick asked, exiting the room before Vincent could really get out an answer.

The writer’s room was Wick’s office, which under any other circumstances would feel cramped. Other circumstances being employee evaluations or terminations. Wick’s presence regularly filled spaces, but in those situations, it drowned people. During writing sessions, though, he’d hold himself back, taking up the position of note taker as Vincent and David—on the occasions when Wick would allow him to sit in on sessions—rambled on about characters and plot points. Vincent found that Wick was a surprisingly competent facilitator; however, it wasn’t often that any of those ideas would find their way into the final drafting stage.

Usually, it was the three of them: Wick, Vincent, and David. But as the deadline grew closer and more programming issues started coming up, Wick thought it would be best if David stuck to programming. David took it well, using the hour he’d allotted for the meeting to nap in the break room. Without him, Vincent felt the room was bigger without the constant possibility that their conversation would dissolve into an argument.

“I’ve been thinking about what Veronica said,” Wick began, leaning against the front of his desk. “The intern. I think she might be right. Maybe we need to integrate that Indian storyline.”

“In what way?” Vincent gripped the edges of his notebook.

“Flesh out the lore of the environment. Like with the paintings.”

“Those were not accurate,” Vincent quickly said, taking a seat in front of Wick’s desk.

“That’s fine,” he said simply, sitting behind his desk. “It might be better that way. We

don't want to be too heavy-handed with the Indian stuff. Just pepper it throughout the compound. The Wendigo might already be too much of a giveaway though."

"Newe tekka'a," Vincent corrected. "Wendigo is Ojibwe."

"Really? I thought it was Cree." Vincent made a face, prompting Wick to quickly add, "I read it on Wikipedia." Vincent stared at Wick, his undercut and his neatly tucked in flannel dress shirt and meticulously clean glasses. His ears were crooked.

"I don't think this is appropriate," Vincent finally said, his voice weak and warbling.

"What do you mean? This would add something very unique to the story. Give the world a definitive mysticism."

Vincent cleared his throat, before saying, "I am not qualified to do this." His hands moved from around the edge of the notebook to grip the arms of the chair. He felt the cold wood of the armrests against his clammy palms. "I'm not a historian or an anthropologist. I'm a designer," he said, adding desperately, "I draw trees."

"And very beautiful ones," Wick said, lifting himself to sit fully on his desk. "You're also Indian, right?" Vincent remained still, Riley's accusations from the day before running through his mind. "You're not flying a plane, Vincent. You don't need a special license for this."

"I think it would be best, legally speaking, if we got an actual cultural consultant like Veronica said."

Wick leaned forward, clapping Vincent's shoulder. "You can do this," the other man said. "Currently, I don't believe we're in any position to hire any new staff. It's just not in the budget right now." Wick finally leaned back, releasing Vincent's shoulder. "Think it over, alright? This is a unique opportunity that I'd hate for you to miss out on."

Vincent nodded, getting up from his seat. As he left Wick's office, he was more certain

than ever that he wasn't qualified to do this. A real Indian wouldn't give in so quickly, he thought, his fingers turning white around the red spiral of his notebook.

In his room, he shed his bag and outer layers until he was stripped down to a t-shirt and jeans. He flung himself on his bed, hoping for sleep, but found that he could not rest. He turned on the lamp next to his bed and pulled out his sketchpad.

He found himself recreating the screenshot from memory. Its head was that of a coyote: a pointed snout; sharp front teeth; large, dark, rounded ears; and golden eyes speckled with hints of auburn. Its front teeth were longer than the rest and seemed sharper. Its body was objectively human and male. Its skin was black like it had been rubbed with coal. Its shoulders were broad and, pulled back, the wings tugged the muscles taut beneath its skin. The wings were massive, extending beyond its arm span. The feathers were mottled, shades of brown and gray.

His cell phone chimed and he absent-mindedly answered. “Vincent.”

“Hi, cuz. You up?” Riley’s voice was thick with sleep. He imagined her dark eyes drooping with fleeting dreams.

“I did answer,” he said, trying to pull the venom from his voice. He sharpened the lines of the creature’s body, giving more definition to its arms and chest. “What’s up?”

“Can I stay at your place?”

His hand stilled.

“Are you okay?”

“Am I ever?” He really didn’t know. They hadn’t been close for a while and their last conversation had ended with him hanging up on her in a rage, but as children, Riley seemed to easily find trouble. When they would go to the lake to swim, she’d wander off by herself for hours. Vincent would have to crawl through the brush and trudge through the muck in search of her. He’d end up with mosquito bites up and down his legs that swelled and itched for days after. As the sun would fall behind Chinaman’s Hat, he’d find her sitting in the middle of the dirt road

toward town. Once he found her sitting at the end of the dock with a busted lip. Her t-shirt was splattered with blood. She refused to tell him how it got there. He'd gotten into trouble for that one.

"Can I stay or not," her voice indignant, hammering the question into a type of accusation.

"Yeah," he sighed, already feeling exhausted by her request. "When will you be here?"

"Already am."

"What do you mean?" A clear knock came from downstairs. "Riley." He tossed his notebook aside, it landing face up on his bed. He hurried down the hallway and down the staircase. "What's going on?" He flung open the door where Riley stood with a backpack slung over her shoulder.

Riley, like all of his cousins, looked very little like him. Their hair and eyes were dark brown, almost black, but that's where the similarities ended. Her skin was dark like his but had a fulvous glow. She was tall and almost gangly looking with her long arms and legs but had a graceful way of moving that made it seem like her body was being carried by the wind. Even in her most frantic moments—final quarter of basketball games or deep distress—she floated. Beneath the porch light, her hair cascading down around the sharp edges of her cheeks and spilling over her squared shoulders, she looked like his mother; she looked like a ghost.

"Are you going to let me in?" He moved away from the door, letting her through. As she passed him, she pulled his phone from his hand and pocketed it on her way to the kitchen. He dutifully followed her, trailing behind at a languid and tired pace.

The kitchen was all off-white tile and windows. Pots and herbs hung from the solid iron chandelier above the island, lined on one side with stools, in the middle of the room. The room smelled faintly of roasted garlic and rosemary from dinner.



Riley tossed her bag onto the wooden kitchen table next to the doorway before making her way around the tiled island to the sink. She rummaged through the dish rack and moved to the cupboards before pulling down a pint glass. She quickly drank two full glasses of water before filling another, leaning back against the counter. She surveyed the room, her eyes flitting across the stovetop, counters, large mason jars of preserves beneath the paned glass windows, and up at the dangling pots. She finished her glass of water and placed it in the sink before making her way around the kitchen to pick through the cupboards.

Vincent slid into down into the bench seat behind the table, thinking better of asking her again about why she came. Instead, he watched her flutter about the room like some giant bird with its wings beating against the wood cabinet doors. She pulled out jars of flour, pulled down shakers of herbs, and picked through a bag of old potatoes he kept in one of the lower drawers. She pulled out a sad, little bag of pinto beans and held it up to her face.

“What are you doing here?”

Still examining the bag, she said, “Indigenous field research.” She placed the plastic bag on the counter, adding as if an afterthought, “For my dissertation.” She stuck her head into the fridge and laughed. “Your shelf only has condiments.”

“I eat out a lot,” he said, watching her body disappear deeper into the fridge.

His housemates worked in town and had taken over most of the fridge.

“Growing boys need real food.” That surprised him and he felt a slight scowl form on his face.

She pulled out a carton of eggs and a packet of bacon, displaying some sense of pride at her find. “Those aren’t mine.” Riley didn’t seem to care much whose they were as she dropped them onto the counter next to the bag of beans.

“What have you been eating anyway?” She moved back to the island, pulling out a knife from the knife block close to the stovetop. She pulled down a pan and placed it on the stove, turning on the fire. He watched her dice pieces of bacon and throw them into the pan. Soon the sound of grease popping and the smoky smell of meat replaced the scent of rosemary. “You look like a walking skeleton.”

“Mostly mustard. On occasion, I like to be fancy and have a little Dijon.” She ignored his comment, preparing the few vegetables she found suitable for cooking. The rest she threw in the trash.

This was her way, he thought. Stress made her act out in very domestic ways. When Gwendolyn was in hospice, Riley would visit with armfuls of food or insistently clean everything twice. On one of his rare visits, he found her in the bathroom—scrubbing mold out of the grout in the shower stall with Q-tips. She had stacked them against each other, teepee style; their ends black and bloated with drain water.

That visit, his second in a handful of months, she had pulled him into the hallway. It had smelled like roses. Valentine’s had been a few days before. A patient across the hall from Gwendolyn’s room had her room filled with bouquets of every color. One arrangement, a rosebush woven into a section of a trellis, reached the ceiling, leaving dark marks where the top scraped the particleboard tile.

The flowers literally spilled into the hallway. Vincent had wondered what kind of woman received so many roses.

“What is wrong with you,” she’d asked, her fingernails digging into his forearm. He’d told her, simply, that he didn’t want to be there, so he wasn’t. She hadn’t hit him like he thought she would. She let go of his arm, leaving half-moons in his skin. His mother had coughed, wet

and heavy in her chest. Riley left him in the hallway to choke on the smell of roses.

He sat outside his mother's room on the floor, waiting most of the afternoon for Riley to finish fussing. Intermittently he'd hear them speak *newe daigwapeh*. Their words filled with air and long vowels slipped between their thin lips. He sat across the rose-scented hallway with his back pressed against the far wall, catching a few phrases. He understood words for weather, times of day, and he knew Vera's name before the BIA forced his grandfather to change it. He watched his mother hold Riley's hand, calling her by his dead name and teasing her in that gentle way he remembered when he was younger. Riley would point to him and say both his names. Even when dementia set in, his mother was not able to disguise her true feelings. Her lightly wrinkled face would twist in disgust as she hoarsely exclaimed, "Aattsaa!" Riley continued to explain, used all her words to express and wave her lanky arms for emphasis, but his mother would grab ahold of Riley's hands and call her "Valerie."

As the sun was setting, she came out of the hospital room with her arms loaded down with bags and a plum colored quilt. She dumped it into his lap. In the end, she took him back to his mother's house and fed him dinner. They didn't talk for the rest of two-week visit. And once Gwendolyn passed, Riley only addressed him when necessary.

In his house now, she made quick work of the vegetables, chopping them with measured skill. The rhythmic sound of the blade hitting the cutting board was somehow comforting against his memories of the last time she'd cooked for him. She tossed the pieces inside the pan. "Have you gone to see your mom?"

"What's to see?" He heard her suck her teeth and watched as she kept her eyes on the heating pan. "I've been working a lot," he amended.

She turned over the searing food, a sudden bloom of steam coming up to meet her face.

“Well, I guess she’s not going anywhere,” she conceded, covering the pan with a clean plate from the drying rack. “How’s work?”

“Busy,” he said, relaxing his shoulders against the back of the seat. “Very busy.” She leaned against the edge of the sink again, her gaze meeting his for a moment before he let his fall to the table. “I’m working on a new project, so it’s been keeping me pretty occupied.”

“What do you do again? Draw trees, right?”

“Mostly,” he smiled, picking at the wooden tabletop. “They got me working this landscape for a portion of the game’s map.”

“So a lot of trees.”

“Thousands.” His nail bit into the wood, gouging out a thin line across the table. “I like it though.” He moved his hand back across the table, digging the side of his thumbnail a little deeper.

“You better if you’re going to be making thousands of them.”

“I like most of it, although my boss is a little bit of an asshole.”

“You sound so diplomatic about it, cuz.” He looked up to see her with the same steady look in her eyes, her jaw a little more set than before.

“He’s paying me so I really can’t complain,” he shrugged.

“That’s a lie. You can absolutely complain. You should sometimes,” she said, lifting the plate from the pan. A cloud of steam and the smell of garlic filled the room. “It would be good to see that you cared about something.”

“I care about things.”

She didn’t respond, instead cracked a few eggs into the pan and folded them in with the vegetables and meat. Satisfied with her mixing, she dumped the contents onto two plates. Pulling

two forks from the drying rack, she made her way to the table.

“Riley, I care about things.”

“I know,” she said, placing a plate in front of him before sitting down herself. “It would just be nice to see.” He watched her take her first few bites, scanning her face for some sign of malice but found none. He only saw the thin lines about her mouth, cracks in the earth about her lips, that he had not seen before. There were other things he saw: the heaviness in her gaze, the dark bags under her eyes, and the patch of white above her right ear. Had they been apart that long?

“Please stop staring and eat,” she said, giving him an exhausted expression.

“Sorry,” he breathed into his plate. “When did you change your hair?”

“I didn’t,” she snapped. He saw her shoulders tense then relax as he began again, “It was the stress.”

“School?”

“Yeah, and the accident.” Putting her fork down, she lifted the section of hair over the white patch. “It’s actually a lot worse than it looks.” Vincent felt his mouth drop a little. The streak of white was as wide as a man’s palm and ran through her dark hair as if someone had brushed a paint-drenched hand through it. “It almost goes through to the end,” she said, lowering her hand. She fussed with her hair a bit, hiding everything except the patch of white above her ear. “It started coming in the day before I woke up. Mom said the doctors thought it was the stress of the accident, but that doesn’t really make any sense.”

“Did it all come in at once or . . .”

“No, it came slow. It was fine after I got out of the hospital. It only really started when I got back to school. I’d have dreams and I’d wake up to another section in my hair.” She gestured

toward his plate.

“Were they nightmares,” he asked before beginning to eat.

“No, just vivid dreams or visions from when I was in a coma. Things I remember from that time.” She got up and filled up two glasses with water.

“What did you see?”

“Trees. Lots of redwoods and moss. I could smell the loam when the sun was hot. I felt how hot it was. It’s strange to remember that.”

“Muscle memory. Your brain stores all this everyday background data that most people don’t take notice of.”

“Like feeling the sun on your skin,” she said, placing the glass in front of him.

“Why do you think people get sunburn?” He smiled, finally feeling the tension in his shoulders leave. “So you dreamed a lot?”

“I did a lot of things, but I don’t think I was dreaming,” she said, sitting back down. “It was familiar.” She directed her gaze back to her plate.

“What was?”

“Everything. The forest, the ocean, the people.” She looked up. “I think I saw your mom.” Vincent noticed how her features softened, her eyes held a worry that he had only seen in his mother’s final days. Even then, Riley had never directed that look towards him. Riley had never been gentle with him or his feelings, which from her perspective seemed to be few in number. So seeing her now with such pity reflected in her eyes was uncomfortable. Vincent disliked it.

“That must have been weird,” he finally said, stacking their plates and standing up from the table. He placed the dishes in the sink and let the water run, his back toward her. The water burned the back of his hands as he scrubbed the bits of dried food from the dishes. He heard her

chair scrape against the kitchen tile and the groan of the stairs as Riley escaped to the upper level of the house.

It was decided, mostly by the sheer will of Riley's presence, that she would stay in Vincent's room. He took the couch in the living room. It wasn't the best sleep. The leather couch stuck to the small of his back where his shirt rode up and the cushions were lumpy. Still, he woke up to his alarm on his phone. He didn't remember having the phone with him before going to bed. Riley had kept it all throughout dinner the night before.

Their conversation hadn't ended as he had hoped. Nothing had really gone as he had hoped. The easy conversation had turned sour; the mention of his mother turned him off. Like a computer, he thought. The thought of Gwendolyn Manning was enough for him to snow crash. His abrupt exit from the dinner table had proven that.

He shook off the thought, standing up from the couch with his phone clutched in his hand. He tried to quietly climb the stairs, but the old house was filled with loose boards and groaning wood floors. He wasn't worried about waking Riley. His cousin, by nature, was an early riser. Her affection for predawn runs had only been strengthened by her time as a collegiate athlete. When Gwendolyn was in hospice, she stayed with him in their house and would wake him up. Her steps, usually light, echoed through the hollow of the hallways and accented by the door slamming as she left. He'd get an hour of sleep before she'd return and start the process all over again until he got up.

Reaching the top of the stairs, he found his bedroom door ajar, the bed made, and Riley nowhere in sight. She must be out running, he thought and then sighed in relief. Thank god.

He dressed quickly, bundling himself up tight, and walked the short distance to the metro. He was lucky that morning, catching the 17 bus just as it was leaving.



He settled in, pulling out his phone to check for usual emails from Wick about deadlines and meetings. Opening the screen, he found that he had two call alerts. Aunt Vera, he thought, probably wondering if I heard from Riley. He pressed the phone icon, expecting a missed call from his aunt and a panicked voicemail littered with cuss words. He checked the timestamp, which read “5:00 AM.” Unlike her daughter, Vera liked to sleep until late morning to catch the best parts of Good Morning America before starting her day. It was odd that she would call so early, but it was possible.

Instead of Vera, he found two missed calls from an unknown number. The area code wasn’t one he recognized—it didn’t even seem viable. The first few numbers were all zeros. He pressed the information icon at the top of his screen, switching it to a new page. The area code wasn’t the only odd thing. The entire number was impossible. The series of digits was three lines long with no discernable logic.

He wasn’t sure what to make of it, so he pressed “call.” The phone immediately rang, which surprised him. He expected to hear the robotic tones of an automated operator, telling him the number he dialed could not be completed, but it had connected somewhere.

As the ringing continued, Vincent felt his heart race and his hands begin to sweat. He suddenly became aware of the other passengers. The man sitting next to him was fast asleep. His large, puffy jacket made him look like a marshmallow stuffed into the small chair next to him. He looked comfortable and content. Still, Vincent’s eyes darted around the filled bus. The sun had just started to come over the mountain ridge, but the redwoods and pines kept them in shadow. He could see the illuminated faces of some of the passengers, their features muddled by the darkness within the cabin.

Most of them were sleeping, their heads pressed against the thick glass windows or back

against the headrests of their chairs. Others were staring at their devices, phones, laptops, tablets. Their bodies were scrunched, trying to make room for their laptops as they typed furiously. The quiet tapping played beneath the hum of the bus as it careened down the winding highway.

He turned away from them, huddling against the window. His reflection was nothing more than a ghost on the glass.

After the fifth ring, Vincent heard an audible click. He held his breath, waiting for someone to speak. The distinct sound of dead air came from the other end of the line. It crackled and he thought of snow whirling on the other end of the call. He remembered a flurry of white kicked up and tossed across a field of tumbleweeds and resilient tall grass. Aunt Vera's shed had been a black mark against all the white and her house, robin's egg blue, had been invisible, blending in with the snow.

He remembered how the windows had seemed to be floating in mid-air like picture frames against the white wall of snow through the window. He saw the ugly interior of Vera's house. The walls of the living room were thin panels of particleboard with fake grain, covered in pictures of Riley, and the top of the beige couch peeked from the bottom of the window.

In the next window was the kitchen. The walls were painted and splattered with country kitsch: rag dolls with the words "A happy kitchen is one I don't have to clean" stitched down its apron, paintings of barns, and plaid curtains. Vera stood leaning against the counter, the Crockpot visibly steaming across from her. Gwendolyn was at the table, her eyes fixed to something outside, beyond what Vincent was capable of seeing.

Cold bit at his nose and stung his eyes. He felt moisture spilling from his face, but he didn't move to stop it even as it touched his lips.

"Hello." The voice cracked, a pitch too high to be natural. "Hello." It was a desperate

sound he couldn't identify as male or female; young or old. It sounded like all of them at once and it felt so loud against his ears that they itched. He raised his hand to his ear as the voice called again. He felt his jaw move and knew he had been the one speaking.

"Hey, man." Vincent felt the other man's hand on his upper arm. "Dude, you alright?" Vincent turned, the phone still pressed against his ear. The puff jacket man's features quickly turned from concern to discomfort.

Vincent nodded, suddenly realizing that he was crying. It surprised him because he hadn't cried at all since he started taking his shots. It was like his tear ducts had suddenly dried up now that he was able to be himself. There didn't seem to be anything worth crying about. So this sudden outburst was frightening because it meant something was changing.

"You're not going to freak out, are you," the man said digging into his jacket pockets, his eyes turned away from Vincent. He pulled out a wad of toilet paper, offering it to Vincent. "Here, man." Vincent scrunched up his face, staring hopelessly at the ball of paper in the man's palm. "I swear, they haven't been used," he chuckled nervously, pressing them into Vincent's own hand. "Whatever it is, it's going to be alright, you know?" Vincent nodded again as he wiped his face.

They spent the rest of the trip in silence, the man falling asleep again and Vincent replaying what he had heard. Logically it was nothing, just dead air, but crying about it made it seem like something. He was tired, he reasoned, only getting a few hours of sleep on the bus and a few in bed before having to go back to Cupertino. Wick was pushing them harder than he had been the month before.

His shots weren't working anymore. The logic of this possibility frightened him the most. It wasn't that common, but it was common enough that he had been warned by his doctor to watch out for any severe changes. He had heard stories that doses could get contaminated. A

technician might add too much testosterone and try to dilute it with estrogen, causing an imbalance in the dose. If that were the case, he'd have to go to the doctor soon and get a different batch. That was bad, but not knowing how long he'd been doing this to his body was worse. What progress would he lose? What would come back?

Vincent tried to reason this out, keep his head. He leaned his head against the glass, concentrating on how cool it felt against his skin. He felt the condensation slide into his hair and touch his scalp. He listened to his breathing, the motion of chest rising and falling, and the warmth of the sun finally coming through the woods.

Upon arrival at the office, Vincent called his doctor, who quickly instructed him to not throw away the dose. "I'll check for contamination, but you might be ready for a higher dose. Are you still seeing your therapist?"

The question seemed to have come out of nowhere, but Vincent answered anyway. "I haven't had the time to set up an appointment. Work's been really busy."

"How's your sleep? Are you eating well?" There was a slight pause before she continued, "Sorry, I don't mean to sound like your mother." Vincent's discomfort was short lived as she continued her questions. "Besides work, are there any other stressors?"

"A few personal ones," he said reluctantly. "Sleep hasn't been that great, but I've been eating alright."

"Good, good. It might be your dose amount and stress that's got you out of sorts. Still, I'd like to make an appointment with you in a few days. I should have the test results back by then."

"Thank you," he said before hanging up. The conversation with his doctor left Vincent feeling tense but assured that he'd be all right. From there the day progressed as usual. Wick and David argued in Wick's office, the interns orbited the room like a small solar system, and

Vincent drew another hundred trees and carved out a settlement behind the PC's cabin.

Wick eventually disrupted his work, appearing behind him with his notes in hand.

"Vincent, you get to that lag problem?" Vincent jumped in his seat, feeling Wick's breath against his skin. He came around Vincent's chair to lean against the side of the desk, practically sitting on his mouse pad. Vincent tried to ignore how physically close Wick was, staring at his screen instead of up into the square lenses of Wick's glasses.

"I haven't checked on it yet," he said, scooting his chair to the left in an attempt to put some distance between their bodies. Without any more prompting, Vincent quickly closed the window he had been working from and switched to another window, knowing Wick's question was an instruction. Working with the man for the past year had made him extremely aware that Wick really didn't ask for anything as much as voice his demands in the form of a question. The answer to those kinds of questions was always 'yes.'

"When you're done with this, would you look at the Nuktuk settlement issue?"

"Isn't David working on that?" He tapped his finger against the side of his mouse. The map was taking much longer than usual to render. "I'm still working on the settlement props."

"They're still trying to figure out that glitch from last week. I thought he'd have it done by now," Wick said, crossing his arms over his chest. "I hope this doesn't impede the rest of the game."

The map finally finished loading, the forest below the cabin and across from the lake coming in crisp color. Wick leaned forward, his head getting in Vincent's way. "Well, isn't that pretty," he said, pulling back.

"Thank you," Vincent replied, already scrolling through the area. It was slow work, the computer having a hard time processing the data. "It shouldn't be doing that. It's not even dense

here.” He’d maneuvered the camera into a clearing, where there were fewer trees, thinking that might have been the issue, but the frame rate was low, stuttering as he changed views. “There’s some extra data here that’s slowing it down.” He tried changing the view and the ground beneath a fairy ring of trees went transparent. A large, white tangle flashed beneath the trees before the ground appeared.

“What was that? Is that supposed to be there?” Wick pointed to the ground beneath the trees. To Vincent’s displeasure, the man actually touched his screen.

“No, there shouldn’t be anything under that.” He dropped the camera until it was beneath the false forest floor. A tangle of white showed up on the screen. He zoomed out, maxing out the scope to see most of that section of the map. A circle of dancing lights showed up on the screen, alerting them that the computer was struggling to process the mass of data so quickly.

“Did you do all that?” Wick’s eyebrows rose as the screen became clearer. “I know you like to be detailed, but, Jesus, Vincent.” The roots of the tens of hundreds of trees tangled together across the entire map. It looked like a highway lit up with white light. “What is it?”

“Mycelium,” he said, looking at the braided and twisted mess of roots. The fine hairs of the mycelium seemed to undulate in some unknown wind.

“Delete it,” Wick said, pushing himself away from the desk. “Otherwise, good work. It’s looking really good. We might be able to meet the launch deadline in a few weeks.”

Vincent tried to focus on the presentation, but the phone call and the memory it had triggered played in his head. The image of his mother, her hair jet black and her eyes so present like the time before the water in her brain drowned any memory of him, played on a loop in his mind. She had stared through him. He could remember that so clearly now.

Wick closed the PowerPoint, minimizing it on the screen at the front of the room. He gestured to his left, signaling toward David. “Next, the performance report. David, please.”

David didn’t bother standing, but placed his phone down on the table, giving the room his full attention. “The testers report a sizeable lag in sections B-6 to D-12.”

“That’s the woods between the settlement and the lake,” one of the interns said.

David nodded, continuing, “There’s a slowdown of action from the PC, but a pick-up of the NPC spawning. They’re coming from non-designated areas: above from the trees and from beneath the ground.”

“Do you have the video of that,” Wick asked, to which David nodded toward Veronica, who pulled it up onto the screen. The video showed the PC, Frank, running down from the settlement and through the heavily wooded area. Frank jumped over and glided beneath fallen trees in a seamless fashion until he crossed a swollen stream. The lag was noticeable. Frank’s body seemed to be moving through molasses as his legs struggled to make their next step. “Vincent, check on that, please. The upload shouldn’t be that heavy to cause that kind of stoppage.”

Vincent nodded but found himself more interested in the placement of the slowdown in the feed. This was where he’d seen that beast, the thing that he chased down a week before. The fluttering of its shirt was a vibrant red against the dark, wet loam.

As the PC continued to slowly move through the area, a few enemies spawned. This area was littered with spawning triggers that would generate aggressive NPCs—bears, wolves, wendigo—but what came up was none of those. “What is that?”

“That’s the other issue,” David said. “There’s a mistake somewhere in the spawning algorithm.” The creature that popped up from the ground, the fallen leaves and branches exploding with its appearance, was larger than their wolves and bipedal. And it was far more muscular than the wendigo Vincent had designed. Those things came up to the PC’s knees and were created as pack hunters. Like in the stories, Vincent thought. The video paused, freezing the creature in place.

It was the same thing he had chased through another bit of forest and to the edge of the cliff. Its body was the same, covered in thick, dark hair, but its face was different. Its features were caught between beast and human. Its maxilla and mandible were still elongated like the coyote’s snout, but the fur that was there before was sparse. Its teeth were still few, but sharp. Its fangs looked to be a little smaller than he remembered them to be. He would have to look at his previous sketch for reference.

“It looks good, though, for a glitch,” Wick said. “Vincent, can you work with this and add it in?” Vincent didn’t move his gaze from the creature on the screen. It was real.

“The code isn’t there, Wick,” David quickly interjected. “We’ve been looking for where this thing is written in, but there’s no trace of it in the script.”

“Vincent can just make one from the still.”

“Sure, but the preexisting glitch is still there.”

“So while we wait for you to find it, we can start redesigning it,” Wick said, giving David a winning smile. “Were there any other notes?”



David gestured to the trio of interns posted in their usual spot along the wall. The two men scrolled through their tablets, while Veronica flipped through the papers on the clipboard.

“Yes,” Veronica said, “The other issue with this glitch is that it’s killing any PC it encounters despite level.”

“The glitch doesn’t seem to be affected by any of the weapons in-game,” the man to her left said.

“We’ve added a special cache for some of the testers to try out. Our thinking being that the glitch might be leveled out for the beta arsenal,” the man to her right added. “So far there’s no effect.”

“How often does it spawn?”

“It’s sporadic, but it seems to be triggered in the areas lower in the valley. Usually on the shore of the lake or in the forest surrounding the Nuktuk settlement.” Veronica flipped a few more pages. “One tester reported it chased him up into the mountain range before flying off a cliff.”

“It jumped,” Vincent asked. The room turned to him and he felt his face heat up. This was probably the first time he’d ever talked without being prompted.

“Yes,” she said, “He said it jumped and flew off the map, which doesn’t seem correct.”

“He was probably high. These are college freshmen,” David said. Veronica raised her hand and he added, “Nothing is able to move outside of the map’s pre-established parameters.”

“Keep working on it. We can’t have some NPC glitch go rogue and kill the settlers.”

“It’s a game, dude,” David scoffed, “not Apocalypse Now.”

“Just fix it, please. Was there anything else?”

“Yes, some of the NPCs have been acting strangely.”

“Strange like how?” Vincent heard himself ask. He was leaning forward in his seat, his hand gripping his knees.

“The ones in the valley, the Nuktuk settlement, have been seen clustering. They usually disperse once the PC has moved beyond the loading checkpoint.”

“What do you mean by cluster? Like in a circle,” Vincent asked, feeling a strong sense of anxiety as Veronica looked through her notes.

“The tester described it as ‘a huddle.’ There also seemed to be a new arrangement. Some NPCs have been seen sitting around a drum, which looks to be in use. They were also singing.”

“How does he know that? We haven’t put in the audio for that section,” David said. His brow was furrowed, looking thoroughly annoyed.

“He saw their mouths moving. He assumed.”

“Could he make out what they were saying,” Vincent asked. He felt his hands getting sweaty against his pant legs.

“No, but he knew it wasn’t English.”

“Of course it wasn’t English!” David flung out his hands in exasperation. “It’s a mechanics issue that needs to be tightened up.” He pointed to the intern to Veronica’s left. “You, fix that.”

“What about the asset,” the intern asked and much quieter to Veronica, “Did we make that?” She searched her notes. Vincent passingly wondered what kind of details she was keeping.

“Obviously we did,” David snapped. “Nothing exists if we don’t make it.” That quieted the room. “As long as they’re not killing each other, leave it,” David said, his voice giving away his exhaustion with the meeting. “We don’t really have time to work on petty aesthetics.” Wick, to Vincent’s surprise, didn’t comment on the programmer’s assertion but nodded toward

Veronica to continue her report.

“Some of the PC-made settlements have been getting attacked as well,” Veronica began again, flipping a page on her clipboard. “Testers have reported that NPCs from Nuktuk have been raiding their settlements.”

“Do you think someone breached the network,” Wick asked, looking at David who scoffed at the very thought. “It’s possible, isn’t it?”

Vincent thought that was a much better explanation than this creature attaining sentience. He hoped that this was a big joke someone was playing on him. He wished for this to just be some lonely guy living in his mother’s basement pulling a prank. See how long it would take to convince a programmer his creation had come to life. Just some IRL creepypasta, he assured himself.

“It is, but not likely.” This quick answer deflated Vincent’s hopes for his sanity. “No one knows we’re even working on this. Marketing hasn’t even seen the game yet,” David said, picking up his phone again. “And you, Vincent, and I are the only ones with the passcode for the network. So unless Vinny has decided to go, rogue, it’s probably another bug.” Vincent crinkled his nose at David’s shortening of his name. “We’ll add it to the growing list.”

“The sooner you get it done the shorter it’ll be,” Wick assured, giving David a tight-lipped smile.

“Is that your subtle way of ending this meeting?”

“Please get back to work, David,” Wick sighed.

Vincent quickly retreated to his desk. He wanted the comfort of his work. He wanted the assured motion of his hands drawing lines across a grid.

Vincent pulled up the entire map of the valley. From the aerial view, he was able to see

that the entire forest was dead. Trees had toppled over. Their roots were taken out from beneath them. They lay on top of each other and across the gaps of the river that ran through to the lake below.

He zoomed the camera in. Up close the ground was bare. The grass that clung to the banks of a river which he had finished months ago, was dead. What remained were shriveled, yellow blades of grass. He selected one with his mouse. As he lifted it, it broke apart as if it had been sucked dry of all its moisture. It wasn't possible because these things were zeros and ones, he reasoned, but he needed to be certain.

He headed for the testers' room. The room was dark; no one had been in there for a few days. The beta testers only came in once a week to work through the updated areas. He didn't turn on the lights, already knowing the lay of the room. He'd been the one to set up the computers and the closed network. He sat at a computer, facing the door.

Turning it on, the computer hummed. It was a comforting sound in the stillness of the room. The screen glowed as the login window came up. He entered his passcode, entering the game. He selected a beta avatar, a man about his build and height.

His avatar dropped into the dead forest. The time of day was still early morning. The sun was still struggling to come up over the mountain ridge. He panned left and right, trying to get a sense of where he was. The fallen trees lay in a continuous pattern that hurt his eyes and disoriented him. His avatar moved in the direction of the settlement. In a few minutes, he was standing outside its gates.

Entering, he found the NPCs standing together in a circle. They didn't disperse like Veronica had reported. They remained in their tight circle. Their arms were linked together as they slowly moved clockwise, shuffling their feet. A cloud of dust came up, covering their pant

legs and bare feet. The earth shook beneath their collective weight. He saw his avatar's legs wobble from the force of their dancing.

To the side of the dancers, he saw a circle of men and a few women sitting around a drum, singing. The sound was off, but he knew what they were saying. He'd heard the song many times before. It was a prayer to the earth, Sogope, to protect them from all Vincent's creations. They were singing their promises to protect her, too, their feet caressing the face of their Mother, Sogope. They were dancing to make him disappear.

He watched them for a while, their motion never ceasing and their prayer seemingly never ending. When a woman pulled away from the circle, he was uncertain if he should trust his eyes. He hadn't slept for more than four hours at a time in the past week and his vision was doubling, but as she came closer he knew it was his mother. Her gait was smooth as if some unseen strings held her aloft.

As she walked toward him, he thought she would talk to his avatar. She looked at him, his digital body covered in digital mud and leaves, then sidestepped around him. She came up to the camera behind it. She came right up to his screen. Her round face filled the monitor.

She looked how he liked to remember her: her eyes clear and present, hair dark and falling off her shoulders. He thought how this was how he always saw her in his memory. Her hair was dark and streaked with silver. Her face was long and her mouth had deep wrinkles from so much smiling and frowning. She was like she was before she was sick when she could remember who he was.

She began to speak. Her lips at first moving slowly, tentatively forming her words. He involuntarily moved closer, straining to hear her voice. Her lips moved faster, articulating words without sound.

His phone rang, the ringtone echoing in the cavernous room. His brow furrowed, trying to read her lips, but it was futile. He watched her eyes well up with tears as she pressed her hand to the screen. Gwendolyn began to speak faster, her cheeks turning rosy with emotion. The ringing became louder, but he refused to pick it up. She stopped as the phone stilled.

With her hand still on the screen, she breathed against it, creating a layer of condensation. He watched her mouth open and close as the glass fogged up. With deliberate motions, she drew her finger over the screen, writing his name: Vincent. He felt for the second time in a week tears wet his cheek.

He held his hand up to the glass, placing it over hers. They stayed like that for a moment before he logged off, Gwendolyn's face disappearing quickly from the screen.

Vincent walked into his room and found Riley leaning out his bay window smoking a cigarette. She had stripped his bed of its duvet and wrapped herself completely within it, draping it low over her head. Vincent watched her raise her arm to take another puff of the cigarette, which disappeared behind the curtain of the blanket. She lowered her hand as a thin stream of smoke came out from beneath the covers. The room was dim.

“Don’t you know those will kill you,” he said, removing his bag and dropping it down next to his bed. The chill came in through the open window and he thought better of taking off his thick coat. Instead, he grabbed another blanket, the plum-colored quilt his mother had made him, and wrapped it around his shoulders before sitting across from Riley on the bench beneath the window.

Outside the night had settled into a still quiet that seemed frozen by the chill in the air.

“I know. I thought that almost dying would have changed my feelings about them,” she replied, stubbing the end on the windowsill and tossing it outside. He grimaced at the action but didn’t say anything. “Now I just really like rolling my own. The pre-rolls just taste like chemicals.”

“Cyanide is good for your skin,” he said, pulling the quilt up to his neck. “Gives you that taipo-girl complexion.”

“You mean corpse,” she smiled before quickly asking, “Do you want to talk about the other day?”

“Fuck, no.” Vincent looked at her, really looked at her, and sighed. She looked hurt by his outburst and he regretted it. “Can we just have a normal conversation first?”

“What?”

“I’ve had the longest day possible. Can you just tell me how school is before you lay shit

like that on me?” Riley looked stunned. It was a new look on her that Vincent liked, but she nodded. “Okay. How’s basketball going?”

“I don’t play anymore,” she said, her surprised expression holding strong. “I haven’t played since undergrad, idiot.”

“Have we not talked in that long? Are you still seeing that guy with the neck tattoo?”

She groaned. “No, thank god.”

“He seemed so nice though. He had like most of his teeth and Uncle Rick really liked him.” Vincent ducked his head, smiling down at the patchwork of the quilt across his legs.

“First of all, how dare you bring up Neck Tattoo. Secondly, he was a hockey player so he was doomed to not have a full set in his head,” she said, biting back her own laughter. “And thirdly, the only reason Uncle Rick liked him was because Neck Tattoo pissed Mom off.”

“He did, didn’t he,” he said, openly laughing now. “I’m surprised auntie let him in the house. He smelled like a wet dog.”

“His car smelled worse.”

“I can’t even imagine,” he said.

Riley laughed out loud. “Jeez, cuz. Do you got to sound so damn white?” She elongated her vowels and softened her consonants to the point where they seemed to disappear altogether. Vincent liked the sound of her voice. He liked how it sounded like her voice, Gwendolyn’s, and Vera’s all at once. He liked that in a few syllables, generations of his family were whole and together with him in the same room.

He smiled, his teeth showing. “It’s these teeth. I got them from John Wayne’s dentist,” he said. “Can you tell what they’re made of,” he asked, turning his head from side to side.

“Plastic? Steel. Oh! You better go back. They missed one of your Indians,” she said,



pointing to the side of his mouth where his canines were. “Your coyote teeth are showing.”

He opened his mouth wider, the teeth in question definitely a little longer and sharper than the rest. Vincent made a show of snapping his mouth closed and raising his arms in a semi-menacing gesture. “All the better to colonize you with, my dear,” he growled, making Riley fall back against the window in laughter.

“That would make a wonderful children’s book,” she said. Her laughter deteriorated into slow chuckles.

“I’ll get to it after I finish this stupid project,” he said.

“I thought you liked it.”

“I do. I don’t like what my boss is doing to it though.” He watched her pull the duvet closer around her body, expectantly waiting for him to continue. “He wants to ‘pepper’ some Native ‘stuff’ into it. It’s stupid.”

“Visibility is nice though,” she said, although Vincent was not convinced that she completely believed that herself.

“I don’t think this is the type of visibility we’d want,” he said, “None of it is accurate.”

“Why don’t you make it accurate then,” she said.

“That’s not my job.”

“Well, it sounds like your boss is making it your job.”

“Yeah and I’m going to have to ask for a pay raise,” he said.

“Or get a new job,” she suggested.

He leaned to the side, pushing aside books, and pulled a small pillbox from its hiding place behind a copy of *Catcher in the Rye*. Riley snickered but didn’t comment on his choice of hiding place. He smiled, appreciating her silence. “It pays the bills,” he said without looking at

her. Balancing the small tin on his knee, he pulled out an ounce of weed and a pack of Zigzags.

“And, for the most part, I like what I do,” he said, not daring to look at her in case she’d know he was lying. He carefully tore off a few pieces from a sizeable nugget and placed it onto the lid of the tin. “I just hate that I suddenly became the Indian in the office, but I like having healthcare.”

“There are other ways to get healthcare.”

“Basic health care doesn’t cover top surgery.” He zipped up the baggie and placed it back into the metal box.

“Medi-Cal does.” She scooted forward so that their knees touched. Her expression became earnest.

“How do you know that?” He carefully filled the creased paper.

“I’ve been researching,” she said so matter-of-factly Vincent had a hard time believing the gesture was not without purpose. She shrugged off the blanket, uncovering her face. Her expression remained impassive. “If it’s just the money and the doctor’s bills, you don’t have to do this. There are other options.”

“And there are other issues.” He shook his head as if to dislodge her words from his head. “I don’t like what I’m being asked to do, but I like doing what I do.” He held the paper up to his eyes, blocking his view of her. He rolled the paper between his fingers, slowly molding the sticky pieces inside, but his hands shook badly enough that they fell out from between his fingers. “And even if I did get Medi-Cal, do you know how long it would take to even find an approved doctor?”

“Probably just as long as it’s taking now.” Vincent felt her hands on his wrists. He felt how warm they were against his own skin, the insurmountable difference in their bodies. She tugged on his wrists, pushing them down into his lap. “If you’re willing to wait now and do

something you don't want to do, why not wait with a clear conscience?" She tightened her grip. The sudden pressure made him drop the unfinished joint into the metal tin in his lap.

"I don't want to," he admitted. He shook off her hands and scooped the weed back into the crease of the rolling paper.

"What do you mean?" Riley snatched the paper from between his fingers. "Talk to me." Vincent shook his head violently, mumbling a response that not even he could really understand. "Vincent," she said and he hated how gently she said it. He knew it was being used strategically. "Whatever it is you need to say, just say it."

"I just want to smoke this joint and go to sleep," he finally said—because what he was thinking was insane. The people in question were not real. They were made up of zeros and ones. They were data.

"Are you worried about this," she asked, placing his sketchbook between them. The book was open to the sketch of the creature he'd seen days before. Its features set in a snarl.

"It's a glitch," he explained. "Bad data." He heard the desperation in his own voice, his throat strangling the words.

"I've seen it." He pulled away, his back meeting the window. He watched her features harden, but not towards him. "I see it in my dreams," she said, mirthlessly laughing. "Why do you think my hair is going gray?" He didn't react, which seemed to disturb her. Her gaze moved from his face to her hands. She rolled the paper between her fingers.

"You sound crazy," he said, although it didn't have any of the bite he intended. His body ached from sitting so long, his sides hurt from where his binder cut into his skin, and he was just exhausted. "I feel crazy," he sighed, exhaling deeply. He slumped against the window. The cold air was coming through the hairline cracks between the panes of glass and the wooden frame of

the window. It moved down the back of his neck and he shivered.

“You’re not,” Riley assured him. She raised the rolled paper to her lips and sealed it. “If you were, we’d both be institutionalized because we’re both seeing the same thing.” She handed him the joint, which he put in his mouth. She lit it for him and he inhaled deeply. “We’re just seeing it in different ways,” she said. Riley watched him hold his breath and exhale. “I don’t know how you did it.”

“I’m not sure I know what I did,” he smirked, taking one more drag before passing it back to her.

“You found a way to the other side,” she said. She took a puff and blew the smoke out the open window.

“Heaven,” he asked, watching the smoke snake out into the night. The night sky was cloudy. It had been clear for most of the weeks. He thought it looked like it might rain. “Like native heaven?”

“Something like that,” she laughed, “but I don’t think there are angels there.”

“What about that thing?” He gestured to the sketch that was still placed between them. He noted he’d drawn the wings crooked. One was higher than the other.

“That’s Ijapu,” she said as if he should have already known. He gave her a confused look, prompting her to continue. “The trickster? Shapeshifter?” Vincent remained silent. She cocked an eyebrow at him. “Coyote,” she finally said.

“Do gods die,” he asked. He plucked the blunt from her hand. “It’s heaven, right?”

“We all die. For some of us, it takes longer.” She leaned back, resting against the wall. He watched her snuggle in the thick blanket, twisting it tighter around her body. “Those people there, in that place, are still taking their time; living the life they wanted when they were on this

side. They're the people they always wanted to be, you know. They're free." He knew she was high because she was rambling, but he couldn't deny that she was making sense.

"You were on that side?" She nodded. He saw her eyes close momentarily before opening wide, then dropping a bit. "Why did you come back?"

She shrugged. He thought that was the first gesture of uncertainty he'd ever seen in his cousin. He marveled at the ease with which that motion came to someone so confident. "I thought about my mom. Who was going to take care of her?"

"Vera doesn't need anyone to take care of her." He placed the joint on the windowsill, it had already gone out.

"I thought that, too. I thought about my students."

"The stupid ones?" He laughed.

"Especially the stupid ones!" She leaned forward, her body leaning over her crossed legs. She began again, her voice rising with each word she said. "If I'd stayed, who'd whip them into shape; nag them about using proper citation; push them to think about changing the world!" Vincent shushed her and she seemed embarrassed, but continued, "I just knew I was living more of the life I wanted on this side. I have more to do here."

"You're so responsible."

"I know, I hate it." He saw her close her eyes again. "I wish I could just let go and do what I want like you."

"What do you mean?" She hummed a questioning reply. He nudged her with his leg, repeating his question.

She sat up, trying to wake up. "I'm just saying, you've always been real good about avoiding things you don't want to. When Auntie Gwen got sick, you bailed." She stretched out,

resting her legs across his lap.

“I wasn’t bailing. She didn’t want me there.”

“Sure, but she’s your mom.” Riley opened the duvet and rewrapped it around her chest.

“Doesn’t matter if she wants you there or not, you have to be there. That’s the real shitty part about being a family: you always have to be there.” She turned over to face the room, burying her nose beneath the blankets.

“Riley, that’s not fair.” He shook her legs, trying to get her to respond. He nudged her a few more times. Once he pushed too hard, sending his cousin tumbling off the narrow seat. She hit the floor with a muted thud. She quickly sat up, startled by her sudden move to the floor.

“Why’d you do that?”

“That wasn’t fair.” She gave him a confused look. “What you said about me bailing on my mom. That wasn’t fair.”

“Well, is it a lie?”

She leaned back on her elbows, patiently and silently waiting for his answer.

“I would have stayed if she’d let me.”

“You’ve never, in your entire life, waited for your mom’s blessing to do anything.

Transferred high schools because the accelerated program was better than the school you were at even though you’d have to take the bus to get there. You applied to the colleges you wanted even though she didn’t want you to be hundreds of miles away from her. You transitioned without even mentioning it to her. She found out when you showed up for Thanksgiving.” Riley sat forward, resting her arms on her thighs. “You could have stayed, so why didn’t you?”

“It seemed easier to let her remember me as I was than keep reminding her I wasn’t who she remembered.” He covered his eyes with his palm, his head resting against the glass. “And

she was disappearing so fast. It felt like one day she was riding horseback and the next she was struggling to get off the couch. When she stopped talking I thought, ‘That’s it. She’s gone,’ but then you came and she started talking again.” He brushed his hand over the top of his head and let it rest at the back of his neck. “It was easier to let her go.”

“Easier for who?” She wrapped her arms around her knees, pulling herself closer to him. He didn’t like how she moved into his space but was grateful she didn’t attempt to sit back across from him. “She was forgetting things, sure, but that didn’t mean she didn’t miss you.” He turned his gaze away from her, preferring the darkness outside. “To be honest, I think you disappeared way before she ever did. At least she had an excuse.”

Vincent kept silent. The street below was partially lit by neon orange streetlamps. The neighborhood was still. He could feel it was already way past midnight. Other people were asleep and not up arguing about dead people.

“Someday you’re going to have to make a hard choice about the person you are.” It began to drizzle outside. Droplets of rain softly hit the window. Finally, he thought, it’s raining. He smelled the change in the air, the pressure shifting.

“You don’t think I already have?” He purposefully let the quilt around his torso drop to about his waist. His chest, still covered by his jacket, was pointedly on display.

“That’s not all you are,” Riley said, picking herself off the floor. “We’re not single parts, but a collection of pieces that make a whole.” She shook her head as if to dislodge whatever thoughts were filling her mind. “I’m sorry. I’m high and getting too philosophical. Do what you want, cuz. I’m going to sleep downstairs.” She gathered the duvet and walked out the room.

The room felt suddenly bigger. The empty wall above his bed looked that much lonelier without Riley to take up his attention. The light in the room seemed brighter to his eyes. The rain

started to come down harder. The light pattering from before was replaced by loud clacking as droplets hit the glass.

His phone chimed. Vincent dug the cell phone from his jeans pocket and unlocked the screen. His chest clenched as he saw his mother's picture.

His mother was always pretty, but she was most beautiful when she was laughing. The contact photo he used for the long forgotten number was from the first winter after his parents' divorce. Gwendolyn sat by the potbelly stove in Vera's living room. Vincent and Riley were entertaining her by doing cartwheels. Unskilled as they were, they tumbled into each other, falling into a pile of candy-sticky limbs. The laugh Gwendolyn Manning released was such a surprise; the long bouts of silence were beginning to be too much for the entire household. Vera took a picture to prove that it happened.

The phone rang two more times before Vincent threw it across the room. It hit the wall, shattering the screen. The sound of his ringtone was replaced by the sound of heavy rain coming through the open window and pooling on the carpet floor.



He dreamed all night. His visions were colored in multiple shades of icy blue and stark white. The cold numbed his cheeks and put an ache in his chest. The wind whistled in his ears as snow fell on his eyelashes and dissolved on his warm skin. His wool sweater itched against his forearm and the silk-lined pockets of his pea coat were slick and cold against the back of his hand. The wind echoed through the valley. It was winter as he remembered it.

He looked about him and saw the large, wooden shed where Vera kept her truck during the winter months. The doors were dark with moisture and the windows were caked in snow. Still, he could clearly see the bright yellow of the wrecked truck.

The yard, an acre of hilly land left to the wiles of sagebrush and gophers, was leveled out by snow. Fence posts marked the edge of the acre like black ticks against the white landscape and gray swept sky above.

He stepped back, his boot sinking into a deep puddle of slush and mud. Looking down, he saw tire tracks pressed into the wet earth. His eyes followed them to the end of the dirt road that was his aunt's long driveway. Large puddles were iced over and filled in with melting snow right before the asphalt highway that cut through the reservation.

Looking toward the house, Vincent saw himself—younger and still sporting long braids that peeked out beneath his bubblegum pink beanie—standing a short distance away bundled in a dark teal jacket that came down to his waist. He knew there was a picture of him like this, looking like the little girl his mother knew, tucked away in an album in Vera's attic. But the colors of his clothes in the photo were washed out by time and exposure to too many wet Decembers. Here, now, Vincent saw himself in bright, vibrant colors that, in contrast to everything else, made his eyes ache; his eyes felt like they were on fire from a relentless fever.

His vision doubled. He saw himself in duplicates before the two images came together again as one. He saw the scene fully: his younger self anxiously watching Gwendolyn through the kitchen window. He remembered that moment so distinctly. Even now he felt the worry bubbling inside his throat like bile.

There's an error in the replication, he thought. Gwendolyn wasn't seated at the table like she had been in his memory. She stood at the window with her hair loose and falling down to her waist. Her face was thinner, gaunter even than he remembered. She was looking out at him. Not his younger self, but him, tall and dark and braids long ago severed from his head. As their eyes remained locked on each other he realized that she looked nervous. Her eyes were wide and her body looked so rigid that Vincent was certain a stiff wind would topple her.

She turned away from him, her gaze focused on the child in the bright jacket and cap. Vincent watched her give a sad smile as she slowly waved at them. His younger self hesitated, but in the end, returned the gesture in the same tentative fashion. He thought the exchange odd.

He watched Gwendolyn beckon the child, her hand waving them to come inside. The child again hesitated, kicking at the slush at their feet as if they had not noticed that they were being called. Gwendolyn knocked on the glass. Her figure wavered from the vibrations. She opened her mouth as a loud horn blared and echoed through the valley. Vincent, startled, looked around him for the source of the noise, but only saw snow whirling in the wind. He looked back to the house and saw his mother continuing her gestures. He watched her mouth move wide to form his dead name. She stopped rapping her knuckles and started banging on the glass with the side of her fist as the noise grew louder. Again Vincent frantically looked for the source of the sound, his vision blurring from the effort. He saw the child still in the same place, kicking the wet snow at their feet.

He heard the horn grow louder as Gwendolyn's motions became more frantic within the house. She could hear the sound, too. He knew she could hear it and it frightened her. Her cheeks were bright red from screaming as she pounded the glass, desperately trying to break it with her fists.

The horn gave one long note as the lights of the thin marquee of the bus flashed orange in the distance across the field. The wind and snow did not seem to deter the bus as it came barreling over the uneven terrain of the lower valley. As it came into view he saw the humongous face of the bus and bi-articulated, segmented body of the cabin. It looked as if it went all the way back to the foothills of the valley. The windshield looked as tall as he was. As it approached, he saw that the dim light inside—book lights mounted over the seats of the passengers—made the glass of the windshield look like the eyes of some comical cartoon.

It didn't take long, but to Vincent, it seemed as if it all happened at once. The bus demolished the fencing and swept across Vera's land toward the house. He saw Gwendolyn screaming now with both of her fists pounding on the window. Her face was red and wet. Her hair flew about her shaking shoulders. The child's eyes remained on their feet, kicking up the earth, as the bus's horn gave another long sustained note that synced with the panicked scream of his mother as she and the house were swept away by the serpentine bus. There was a moment, less than a second, where everything stood still as the bus continued to move before him without any end in sight. It was a blur of soft, dirty light and the sound of the horn dying in the distance as it passed. Vincent didn't have time to react as the child reached out toward the moving vehicle and was lost, too. The exhaust from the bus left a trail behind them. For a moment he wasn't certain he had seen what he had seen—it happened so fast—but he knew he was alone. The smell of biodiesel hung in the air for a quick second before it was taken away by the whipping wind.

He was not allowed to enjoy or mourn that loneliness as he heard the horn again. The bus doubled back, coming directly at him. From this angle, Vincent was, cynically, able to appreciate the monstrous features of this machine. The eyes he had thought cartoonish were, in actuality, frightening. They were wide and dark. The dim light inside gave the face of the machine a dead look that made it seem vicious. The exhaust trail was a large, black cloud that scraped against the underbelly of the sky. As it came closer, he heard the engine growl like some gigantic monster that was tearing up the earth with its hooves to get close enough to devour him.

The headlights blinded him as it neared him. He felt the heat of the engine against his chest. He knew he should move, he could feel his legs struggle to lift themselves from the ground, but he could barely raise his hands as it hits him.

Vincent didn't wake up with a start, but annoyance. The rain outside had started to fall harder. He could see it hit his window in the pale morning light, which he should not be seeing from his window. He groaned as his phone rang, a blaring horn of a Model-T that he had once been certain would wake him from the dead.

Fumbling around in his sheets and duvet, he found the broken device under his pillows. The screen was completely cracked—pieces of it had come off from the impact—and only emitted a dull gray glow. Vincent cursed as he pricked his thumb on a jagged piece of the screen. The interface changed color as he heard David's panicked voice.

"Hello," he answered, kicking off his blankets. He was relieved to see that he'd been lazy enough the night before to not change out of his clothes.

"Jesus fucking Christ man, where are you?" David's voice was void of its usual casual sarcasm and bite.

"Sorry. I'm on my way," he said, tossing the phone on his bed. He expected David to

hang up, but he continued talking loudly on the other end of the line. Vincent collected his boots off the floor and quickly slipped them on as David belted out a few curse words. On his feet, Vincent scooped up the phone and held it a little away from his face as he answered, “Calm down. I’m coming. I’ll be there in an hour.” He slipped his back over his shoulder and flung his coat over his arm.

“No, no, no!” David’s panic confused him. “The cab should be there by now.”

“What? I can’t afford that.” He stomped down the stairs, each step groaning under his weight. He vaguely heard Riley moving around in the kitchen. The house smelled like fry bread and slow-cooked beans. “I’ll take the bus.” He dug into his pockets for his wallet and keys.

“I’m paying for it. You have to get here ASAP, man. Wick is going a little bonkers.”

“I don’t see the emergency,” he said, raising his voice to be heard over the rain. Finding his keys, he locked the door. He saw the cab waiting for him at the end of the flooded walkway.

“Something happened with the game. A virus.”

“A virus?” Vincent’s mind went quickly back to the digital people and their circular dance in the pixelated village. He thought of prophecies and the world being drained of all the white people. Wick. David. All of them slipping down a drain.

“Yeah, it’s pretty much eating up everything.” Vincent imagined the destruction of the world he coded as drying out and crumbling from the slightest touch. The mountains turned into mounds of ash and the lake became a crater on a digital plain. The wooden walls of the cabin would rot and be reclaimed by the redwood ivy, vines wrapping around the remains of the porch and steps.

“How’d that happen?” It was the dance.

“I’m still trying to figure it out. I have the interns going through sign-in logs to look for

any anomalies or unknowns. Whoever planted this thing is going to die.” David, as usual, was being overly dramatic and needlessly aggressive. “I’m going to duct tape them to the wall and use them for target practice.”

Ducking his head under his coat, Vincent ran to the cab. He fumbled with the door, struggling to hold his coat over his head and keep the phone pinned against his shoulder. The broken pieces of glass dug into his cheek. All the while David continued his rant. Vincent heard him curse again as he slipped into the backseat of the car.

“It’s going to be fine.” Vincent made eye contact with the driver in the rearview mirror. The man’s eyes were golden. In the bright gray light coming through the windshield, he saw small flecks of red at the edges of his irises. He’d seen these eyes before. “I’ll take care of it.”

“Shit, this could really ruin us.” David’s words were strangled by his distress and Vincent imagined his face turning a deep shade of red. “This is not the hill I want to die on.”

“It’s going to be fine.” Vincent broke eye contact with the driver as they pulled away from the curb. “I’ll take care of Wick and we’ll figure out what’s going on,” he assured. David agreed briefly before hanging up. The line went dead and the screen went black.

The rain was coming down in sheets, but the driver didn’t seem to notice. He drove quickly down the road to the freeway, weaving in and out of late morning traffic. The car sped through flooded intersections, making large waves that reached out from beneath the wheels of the car into the street like clawing hands. Vincent held tight to the armrest along the side of the door.

“Can you slow down,” Vincent asked, his voice strained. He felt the fear rising up his neck as an angry, red heat. “I don’t need to get there that fast.” He smiled weakly at the golden eyes in the rearview mirror.

The driver didn't slow down nor did he take his eyes off Vincent as he merged onto the freeway. He narrowly missed colliding with another car. "Dude! Slow down!" Vincent felt his voice in his throat with the desperation he felt. "You're going to kill us."

The golden eyes locked with his for a moment before returning to the road. "I guess it's really coming down, innit," the driver said as if he had only now seen the rain pouring down the windshield in front of him. "It's a good sign," he said. The car slowed, but the driver maintained his erratic driving between lanes. He'd punctuate his swerving with short comments that, to Vincent, were too Californian to be real. "We haven't had rain in years." The road curved at a sharp angle as it moved past Pasatiempo and toward Summit Road. "The reservoir was getting pretty low." This was said during a series of tight turns that were clogged with commuters. "Thought we end up dying of thirst," the driver laughed, "dying of thirst!" He cackled as the car picked up speed and careened down the short hill passed Pop's Pizza. A soft curve, which would have been easy to navigate at a reasonable speed, became a danger. The driver merged into the left lane without signaling in an attempt to compensate for the high speed of the car as it took the turn.

Vincent felt his heart race as David's words came back to him. This is not the hill I want to die on.

Without any sense of urgency, the driver turned on the radio. The signal would come in and out, the broadcaster's words being interrupted by static and sizzle.

Vincent's phone blared a flash flood warning. He tried to silence it with a few swipes across the screen, but the face was too cracked to register his touch. He pressed the home button, which did nothing, then the hold button above the camera lens. The phone went silent. The two men were silent too. The rhythmic squeak of the wipers kept a solid beat for the crackle and pop

of the weak radio signal.

The road was congested with cars, people trying to get out of the small town. Delivery trucks, student commuters, and people just trying to leave, all squeezed onto the two-lane highway now dangerously slick with rain and spilled oil. Vincent felt the tires slip on the wet road.

He tried pushing down the fear welling up inside his chest. He intently examined the passing scenery outside. He saw the clean cuts in the cliffs above him from generations worth of rain. The wire mesh laid over the rock bulged with the added weight of the trapped rainwater. The trees above, young Douglas firs, clung to the craggy rocks overhead.

As the car bounded across the wet road, he unlocked the files in his mind where he'd stored all those pictures. He'd taken photographs of this section of the freeway, dedicating a quarter of his hard drive to it. He'd studied each picture, marking them up with notations. Vincent knew this land intimately. He'd made every tree in the valley. He knew every rock and every coiling vine of ivy. Even with what the 'virus'—really a ceremony finally completed—was doing to his artistic efforts, he was certain he could see the world he created. He'd envisioned the highway crumbling beneath the cars and the cliffs breaking away from the mountainside. The trees would slide down the broken earth into a void, a black hole of unimagined space. The cabin he'd built would drop into nothing. He imagined all of his work being sucked into a swirling black hole as the 17 bus zoomed by, engulfing the car in a spray of water.

The driver swerved, hydroplaning into and through the guardrail. The car was airborne for a few seconds, in which time Vincent saw the driver's face. The man's long features reminded him of a coyote's. As the car flipped, the driver disappeared from Vincent's sight. Briefly, Vincent thought he might have been tossed from the car from the impact.



It was about a 50-foot drop to the bottom. The car tumbled, its momentum propelling it into a tight roll. The initial impact jostled him in his seat. His seatbelt would leave a long, thick bruise over his collarbone and side. A burn from the nylon belt would cover the skin just below his jaw to the top of his shoulder.

The car rolled, taking out a few long rows of trees before making a complete stop at the base of the valley, landing on the passenger side. The hood was caved in on one side. The windshield and all of the windows were cracked or completely gone. Rain freely fell into the cabin of the car and onto Vincent's bloody face.

The car's turn signal had been triggered during its roll down the side of the mountain. The front lights blinked in a steady beat that synced with the clicking of the blinker; the sound seemed to echo within the cabin of the flooding car. Orange light flashed and lit up the thick cluster of trees ahead of the car.

With a low groan, Vincent crawled out of the back seat, shimmying out of a broken window. As he stood upright, his knees aching, he saw that his hands were red with blood and cold. His left pant leg was torn and the crisp crease down his shins had been washed away by rain and smears of mud.

The EMTs should be here soon, he thought before realizing that he couldn't hear the passing of cars or trucks. The rain was the only thing he could hear. It sounded like the static between stations on the radio in a rental driving through Riddle or tires skidding around a sharp corner of a dry dirt road. It made his ears itch.

And it made him tired. He leaned back against the overturned taxi, feeling all the weight of the world push down on his chest and fill his lungs. He closed his eyes and listened to the hiss surrounding him. He tried to imagine he was at his desk putting his system through an audio test;

white noise pumped into each speaker and the volume increased at measured intervals. He opened his eyes, yielding to the certainty that he was listening to the rain and not the sizzle of his computer. This inevitable reality could not be overwritten.

Vincent looked up into the gray sky, obscured by needle heavy branches, as the rain poured down on his face and into his eyes.

Without a thought, he pulled his phone from his pocket and voice dialed. The ringing soothed his ears, reminding him of songs sung around a wide buckskin drum and the soft stepping of feet moving together in a circle. His face was wet. It might be blood. The thought didn't scare him as much as he thought it would. It might just be rain.

Someone picked up and he spoke first. "E hakanniyu?"

"Ne tsaa, tua'a. E hakanniyu, Vincent?"

"Kinapainihka," he said and felt the exhaustion of just saying the word. Almost as an afterthought, he added, ". . . pintsai. . .kwitsipih." The words came out slow and broken in all the wrong places and for a brief moment Vincent worried that he would be misunderstood, but then he heard laughter. A deep laughter that rumbled in the chest and overtook his senses.

"Aattsaa!" The sharp exclamation had none of its bite; her voice was playful as if she was scolding a child for stealing cookies. He heard the distinct sucking of teeth.

"Kaitsaan," he teased, letting the word stretch like when he was a child. He pushed himself off the side of the car and walked to the front of the cab, the headlights shining on his back. He undid the top buttons of his coat as another bout of laughter washed over him. He removed it, the rain instantly soaking the thin shirt beneath, as he kept walking toward the edge of the clearing.

"Haa'a," she confirmed. The word came out like a sigh at the end of a long day; a single

breath pressed against the shell of his ear. “Haa’a, kaikkaitsaan.”

“Ne tsaan neesunkanna.” He nodded his own head as if to agree with himself that ‘yes, he felt well’ and good and tired. “Ne ma’i aise Gwendolyn ham tu’a,” he asked, his voice almost hysterical and he knew he was crying. He was breathing hard, his chest rising and falling in slow, uneven gasps. “Ne ma’i?” He was afraid he’d said it wrong; that his words were mixed up somehow; that she would tell him ‘no’ or she’d gently disappoint him and call him ‘her child.’

“Haa’a, haa’a, haa’a. . .” Her voice guided the word like a steady hand at the small of his back.

Vincent stepped out of the clearing into the darkened woods.